

FRED  
AND  
MADGE

JOE ORTON

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Joe Orton

# FRED & MADGE



NICK HERN BOOKS

London



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*Fred & Madge* was first performed at the Hope Theatre, London, on 15 September 2014, with the following cast:

PETRIE	Andy Brock
FRED	Jake Curran
MISS OLDBOURNE	Loz Keystone
WEBBER	Jordan Mallory-Skinner
MADGE	Jodyanne Richardson
QUEENIE	Geordie Wright
<i>Designer</i>	Christopher Hone
<i>Lighting Designer</i>	Seth Rook-Williams
<i>Costume Designer</i>	Harriet Stanton
<i>Sound Designer</i>	Jordan Mallory-Skinner
<i>Producer</i>	Adam Spreadbury-Maher
<i>Assistant Producer</i>	Rachel Illingworth
<i>Production Assistant</i>	Ramona Pulsford
<i>Stage Manager</i>	Robert Perkins
<i>Graphic Designer</i>	Design by Minty
<i>Production Photographer</i>	Christopher Tribble

## **Joe Orton and *Fred & Madge***

*Thursday February 24th 1949*

Not a good day. Finished all my work so asked Horace to give me some work I didn't like cleaning ink wells.

*Monday April 11th*

Not much to say work as usual excruciatingly rotten.

*Thursday April 21st*

I had to help necky in post room it was dead awful.

The above is taken from Joe's 1949 diary. They show his hatred of the daily grind of mundane workaday life in Leicester. He mirrors these sentiments in the opening scene of *Fred & Madge*: 'Oh the boredom! The fatigue of living.'

This monotonous existence was to be his life until he found the theatre, first through joining amateur-dramatic societies in Leicester and eventually securing a place at RADA where he met and eventually moved in with Kenneth Halliwell. For twelve years they lived a monkish existence. They rarely socialised with anyone; they read voluminously and began writing together. They both had a revulsion of the ethics of work that dominates our lives.

*'Do you know what subreption is?' said Donnelly.*

*'No.'*

*'To obtain something by misrepresentation. That is what our civilisation does – it holds carrots in the air to make donkeys work. Do you know what it wants in exchange for a house, a car, a larger house, two cars, a television set in every room?'*

‘No.’

*‘It wants their lives.’*

Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell, typescript novel  
*The Boy Hairdresser*

In the tradition of Samuel Becket, Ionesco and Pirandello, Orton in this play is experimenting with the theatre of the absurd, a form he intended to return to in the late 1960s. Orton wrote in a footnote of his diaries, ‘I’ve written the first draft of a third play [*What the Butler Saw*] which will be a conventional form, but the ideas I’ve got for a fourth play won’t be conventional form at all. So you see I am not even committed to the conventional theatre. But I think one should prove that one can do it, like Picasso proved he could paint perfectly recognisable people in his early period and then he went on to some much more experimental things.’\*

In Joe’s early novel *Head to Toe* the character Gombold says: ‘*Cleanse my heart give me the ability to rage correctly.*’ Later, turning to the genre of farce Joe Orton found his own unique voice and raged exceedingly, wonderfully correctly.

Leonie Orton Barnett  
*Joe’s sister*

\* Joe Orton cited in Arthur Burke’s *Laughter in the Dark: The Plays Of Joe Orton*, Greenwich Exchange London 2001, p. 92

## **Characters**

FRED

MADGE

QUEENIE

GLADYS

WEBBER

DR PETRIE

MISS OLDBOURNE

OLD MAN

SYKES

SMALL PART PLAYER

## **Settings**

ACT ONE

England. A normal room belonging to Fred and Madge.

Two fireside chairs and a standard lamp are visible.

A children's playground.

A factory.

A theatre.



ACT TWO

A hospital. Five years later.

A home in England.

A garden.

The Daily Mail Building.

ACT THREE

A home in an overgrown jungle of an England.

The same, six months later.

## ACT ONE

*Curtain up. Two fireside chairs and a standard lamp are visible. Silence. FRED and MADGE are sitting, staring into the distance.*

FRED. Speak to me.

MADGE (*firmly*). No.

*Silence.*

FRED (*exploding*). Oh, the boredom! the fatigue of living! No merriment, no whoopie, no frolics. We never have a spree. Time hangs heavily on our hands. (*Pause.*) If we were animal lovers it would give us an interest in life. (*Pause.*) You do nothing to break the monotony. You haven't bothered. You've let things slide.

MADGE. I have the shoes to think about; the heels, the soles, the polish, the nails.

FRED. Shoes.

MADGE. – shoes!

*Silence.*

FRED. We could keep pets. (*Pause.*) What do you say to bats?

MADGE. What about the coal? They're heavy on coal. And coal isn't what it used to be. (*Pause.*) When I remember what it used to be like. The flames –

FRED. – how bright they were.

MADGE. How they leapt up the chimney.

FRED. Up and up, up and up.

MADGE. We couldn't look at the fire –

FRED. – keep away, you'd say, it's so bright!

MADGE. How bright it used to be.

FRED. And the nuts we roasted. All those nuts roasting in the flames. All those onions and potatoes in their jackets. Oh!

MADGE (*wistfully*). We've had some exciting moments.

FRED. – those onions in the winter –

MADGE. And there! think of the winter. It's all right in the summer, but in the winter you'll wish we'd never bothered. Bats are no company; they hibernate.

FRED. You're a hard woman.

*Silence.*

MADGE. What about the time you tried to breed locusts?

FRED (*in great agitation*). You make me lose confidence bringing that up.

*Silence.*

Do you think Queenie could lend a hand?

MADGE. I don't know; she has a lot on her –

FRED. – plate.

MADGE. A lot on her plate –

FRED. – plate.

MADGE. – running the snack counter. (*Pause.*) They do cold milk now as well as hot.

FRED. It's a dreary life.

MADGE. Where does it all lead?

FRED. Work, work, work, for forty years and all you get at the end of it is a pension. Not even a thank you.

MADGE. It isn't good enough.

FRED. People don't know how to treat one another.

MADGE. It's a shame.

FRED. Think of the things that could be done to improve people's lives; they could do a lot to make things pleasant. They might have cards printed saying charming, delightful, felicitous things, and they could distribute them. Give people refreshing smiles in the street. Oh, there's a lot to be done. (*Pause. Bitterly.*) Not even a thank you!

MADGE. They don't stand up in the buses.

FRED. They don't raise their hats to a lady. Times are bad. Never raising a hat.

MADGE. – hats.

FRED. – hats.

MADGE. – nobody wears hats now.

FRED. Oh! I think the whole world has gone mad!

*Silence.*

MADGE. That's what it is.

FRED. Mad.

MADGE. You were always very perceptive, dear.

FRED. Mad.

MADGE. – put your finger right on the –

FRED. Mad.

MADGE. – heart of the matter –

FRED. Mad.

MADGE. – solve all our problems if we –

FRED. Mad.

MADGE. – did away with them all together. (*Pause.*) I'm frightened. I am. (*In a panic.*) I'm easily worried and depressed. Everything gets on my nerves. What's the matter with me?

*Silence.*

FRED (*in a low voice*). Bats.

MADGE. We've Janice to consider; she's a growing girl.

FRED. Bats.

MADGE. She's growing.

FRED. Growing all the time.

MADGE. It wouldn't be right for her sake.

FRED. No, it wouldn't be right as she's growing. (*Pause.*) Think of a growing girl!

MADGE. She's getting big now. She's shooting up.

FRED. The expense is crippling.

MADGE. Yes, the expense is crippling.

FRED. I don't know which way to turn.

MADGE. It won't always be the same.

FRED. She'll stop one day.

MADGE (*brightly*). It's something to look forward to.

*Silence.*

FRED (*shocked*). She'll be gone from us. Gone! Our baby. What will we do? What will we do?

MADGE. We'll be old.

FRED (*the idea sinking in*). Old. That's it! We'll be old. Every minute we're growing older and older and older and older –

MADGE (*sharply*). Stop it!

FRED. – and older and older and older. Gradually mouldering away. Turning to –

MADGE. Stop it, will you!

FRED. – dust. Turning to dust. Look at my hand, my arm; they're firm now, they're young; in a few years I'll be wrinkled, toothless, a mass of decay.

MADGE. Stop it!

FRED. I'll be bald. I'll be impotent. I'll be unable to climb stairs. I'll be cold in the middle of summer. I'll be garrulous. I'll be drawing the pension. And soon after that –

MADGE (*hysterically*). Stop it! stop it! I can't stand it!

FRED. I'll be dead. What am I doing sitting here talking when I'll be dead? What am I doing, mouldering slowly into deaf and lonely old age? There's something wrong somewhere.

MADGE. What's it all for? (*Pause.*) I'm so depressed. My nerves are on edge. I think I ought to see someone about it. I ought to see –

FRED. You ought to see a doctor.

MADGE. I don't have faith in doctors.

FRED. No, you don't. And you need faith.

MADGE. And I don't have any. It's no good. No good. Everything looks black. What future have we? We've no future.

FRED. Age, aches, and the grave; that's the future.

MADGE. No future.

FRED. You've no faith. No faith.

MADGE. None at all.

FRED. Think of the times we could have had. The wasted opportunities. (*Pause. With inspiration.*) I could have been a clergyman; think of that!

MADGE. It's a good job.

FRED. Good wages and short hours.

MADGE. It's steady.

FRED. It's always there.

MADGE. It's stimulating. (*Pause.*) It's stimulating.

FRED. You give a lot of pleasure to others.

MADGE. It helps to make the world go round.

FRED. All the sermons I could have preached! All the marriages solemnised. (*Pause.*) I might have got my name in the papers! (*Pause.*)

Or I might even have been a bus conductor.

MADGE. There's a lot of climbing stairs on the double-deckers. (*In anguish.*) What if you were on a single-decker? Oh!

FRED. All the tickets I could have punched.

MADGE. Oh!

FRED. I can't bear it.

MADGE. I can't bear it. If you were on a single-decker and they made you climb the stairs – the danger!

FRED. The times I could have rung the bell and made out my returns and done overtime. Pounds out of pocket I am.

MADGE. So dangerous! I'd be a widow. Think of Janice and me left alone. Don't do it, for our sakes.

FRED. You're taken care of; I'm insured.

MADGE. What am I going to tell Janice? – she thinks the world of you,

FRED (*harassed*). I don't know what to do for the best. I'm out of pocket, and you worrying me – You'll have me in my grave. Here! see these? Grey hairs. Grey hairs!

MADGE. – oh, dear!

FRED. Grey hairs. I'm only thirty-nine. Thirty-nine; with more grey hairs than my father had when we buried him. He was eighty and not a grey hair.

MADGE. Perhaps it was dye.

FRED. Not a grey hair.

MADGE. Perhaps it was dye.

FRED. I'm going to pieces. This rushing about. Hurrying backwards and forwards. It's driving me out of my mind. (*Pause. In a panic.*) Do you know, this morning I – I forgot where I was going. I didn't know where I was going.

MADGE. You worry too much.

FRED. I worry over you and Janice and the house.



MADGE. Tossing and turning in your sleep. Worry, worry, worry.

*Silence.*

FRED. I forgot where I was going.

MADGE. Where were you coming from; that's more to the point?

FRED. I don't know.

MADGE. You don't know?

FRED. No.

MADGE. You don't know where you were coming from either?

FRED. No.

MADGE. It's very worrying.

*Silence.*

FRED. I found myself – there – in the street – wondering. I tell you straight, I'm all on edge. It's the life we lead. This coming and going, and the things they put in the bread.

MADGE. Chemicals.

FRED. The chemicals they put in the bread. It's not right. It's not natural. They should leave it alone. Leave it alone and we'd be all right. (*Pause.*) Oh, I get such a funny feeling sometimes.

MADGE. Funny feeling?

FRED. Here. In my head. As though I were going to do something violent.

MADGE. Something violent.

FRED. Yes.

*Silence.*

MADGE (*plaintively*). You never told me this before.

FRED. No.

MADGE. Why not? I have a right to know. I'm your wife. And –  
Fred – listen to me.

FRED. I am listening.

MADGE. If –

FRED. I am listening.

MADGE. Yes.

FRED. I think I'd like to do something violent to you.

MADGE. Oh, dear.

FRED. – and to Janice.

MADGE. To Janice?

FRED. Do you both a mischief.

MADGE (*indignant*). Our baby? How could you. The times you've told me what a blessing she is. The pleasure she's given you. (*Pause.*) She's such a pet. Such a nice girl. She is.

*Silence.*

And she's popular. She must be the most popular girl in the whole school. And it's frightened her. She isn't used to it. It's had a peculiar effect on her; she's been off her food.

*Silence. He stares into the distance; his face wears a blank look.*

She's on about learning to scrub floors; to scrub and polish and cook – it's a job with a future. (*Pause.*) Can we afford to have her trained, do you think?

*Silence.*

There's a lot of advantages. She'll be a goldmine; a classic in her own right. If that's the career she's set on, then who are

we to stand in the way?

*Silence.*

FRED (*wearily*). It's time to change.

MADGE. A change is as good as a rest.

FRED. Time to go out into the streets; into the cold; into the harsh light. You'd better wrap yourself up.

MADGE. The weather's bad.

FRED. It might be raining.

MADGE. Clear the chairs –

FRED. – and the lamp.

MADGE. It's bitter out. I can't stand the cold. I'm not strong, not strong at all.

*Enter QUEENIE.*

QUEENIE. I've arrived.

MADGE. Hallo.

*FRED has wheeled a large bath forward.*

QUEENIE. What's the matter with him?

MADGE (*under her breath*). Take no notice, he's being awkward.  
(*Louder.*) I suppose you think that's funny?

FRED. What?

MADGE. You know very well. Don't you?

FRED. No.

MADGE. There's no need to show off because Queenie's here. A lamp-post is all we need. You can put that back where you found it and behave yourself.

*He pushes the bath away.*

QUEENIE. Sorry if I barged in. See you in a bit, then?

*Exit.*

*Silence.*

*FRED brings on a lamp-post and sets it up. MADGE changes her slippers for walking shoes and puts on her coat.*

MADGE. When are you going to stop making a show of yourself?  
Every time she comes you play up.

FRED. I don't know what we have to have her here for in the first place.

MADGE. She's my sister.

FRED. Every night it's the same. She always chooses to come when we're up to our necks changing.

MADGE. She can't help it.

FRED. She might give us a miss one night.

MADGE. It isn't her fault.

FRED. When you two have finished out here, don't expect me to strain myself shifting lamp-posts backwards and forwards. I'm fed up. See? Fed up. And I don't mean maybe. Backwards and forwards night after night. It isn't good enough.

MADGE. What do you imagine she must think of you, making an exhibition of yourself?

FRED. I don't care.

MADGE. I believe you do it on purpose.

FRED. It's getting on my nerves the way she turns up day after day on exactly the same cue. You could tell the time by her.

MADGE. I'm not listening to any more. You'd better go and find that Arthur you're so fond of.

FRED (*going off*). I'll be in the back if you want me.

*He exits. MADGE powders her nose. Fade in the noise of a children's playground.*

*Enter QUEENIE.*

QUEENIE. All ready?

MADGE. Just a minute. (*Fetches an umbrella from the back of the stage.*) Now –

QUEENIE (*inhaling a deep breath*). – look at your Janice!

MADGE. I can't seem to get her to stop the habit of dusting when she's excited.

QUEENIE. She's highly strung, that's what it is.

MADGE. She's had a nasty cold.

QUEENIE. She's looking peaky.

MADGE. Look at her now – brushing the steps. I'm thinking of having her trained.

QUEENIE. Trained?

MADGE. She's got it in her, I'm sure. (*Pause.*) I gave you a ring last night; weren't you in?

QUEENIE. It was you, was it? I heard the phone go about eight. We were watching the re-makes of those detergent adverts.

MADGE. I must keep my eyes open. He's too mean to buy the *Television Times* so we never know when anything is on. I missed Fabulous Camay yesterday.

QUEENIE. What a shame. (*Absently.*) You didn't miss *her*, did you?

MADGE (*surprised*). Was *she* on?

QUEENIE. My word, yes.

MADGE. And you saw her?

QUEENIE. We were so excited. She was on a horse.

MADGE. What kind of a horse?

QUEENIE. Big made, you know. And black.

MADGE. Black? She seems to go for *big* BLACK –

QUEENIE. – horses. Yes.

MADGE. She works so hard, poor thing. I'm sure she overdoes it.

QUEENIE. Do you really think so? Do you really think so?

MADGE. I'm sure she does. I only hope she won't –

QUEENIE. I'm sure she won't.

MADGE. What I think is so nice is she's just the same as you and me. I feel she gets up in the morning feeling a couple of degrees under just like us.

QUEENIE. And *more*.

MADGE. When her sister got married she didn't bat an eyelid, did she?

QUEENIE. She certainly did not.

MADGE. She didn't bat an eyelid; though you and I noticed a thing or two. Though we noticed the way the wind blew. She takes after her granny. SHE was a grand old –

QUEENIE. Lady, SHE was.

MADGE. A real –

QUEENIE. Lady –

MADGE. With a heart of gold and a –

QUEENIE. – to match. Yes, yes. She was a lady. I don't think ordinary people could hazard a guess whether –

MADGE. Truth is certainly stranger than fiction. But I like them. They're a grand lot. So homely. You feel they're just like US.

*Silence.*

QUEENIE. Her auntie was a nice woman. It came as a big shock to me when I heard she'd passed over. A big shock. She'd always been my favourite. Didn't she look impressive in her uniform?

MADGE. It suited her.

QUEENIE. It brought her out.

MADGE. Her auntie's hubby is some kind of a relation of her hubby, isn't he?

QUEENIE. Do you think that's wise?

MADGE. I'm all against it myself, though they seem to be managing.

QUEENIE. If you read between the lines.

MADGE. Her hubby must be a sport to have around. They must get on well together, because she's the same, you know?

QUEENIE. – just the same.

MADGE. She only looks at home with a scarf over her perm at a race-course, or watching polo, or cricket. She clearly never has an intelligent thought in her head (and neither does he for that matter) and that's what I like to see.

QUEENIE. Oh, well, naturally. It runs in the family, doesn't it? They can't help the way they're made, can they?

MADGE. And what about her mother?

QUEENIE. What about her mother? What about her mother? I don't know.

MADGE. Her mother and her sister's hubby seem as thick as thieves.

QUEENIE. NO!

MADGE. I don't say for a minute –

QUEENIE. Oh, I'm sure you must be mistaken –

MADGE. She wouldn't like that at all, would she? I'd say she wouldn't. I'd say she wouldn't. And yet, if the worst came to the worst, she'd take it in her stride. She is a miracle. No one but her... no one else in the world... could draw such crowds, attract such cheers and win such warm affection. For she is the only person in the WORLD whose grace and charm cut through race, creed, religion and politics. Why everyone has a soft spot for her. WITHOUT EXCEPTION. The whole world shares the ideals she represents. And that's what I always say. She's a trouper. She's one of the best. SHE IS A LADY. I'll say she is. And don't you let me catch any of you forgetting it.

*Silence.*

QUEENIE (*shaking her head*). I can't get over you missing her.

MADGE. I don't know how it happened.

QUEENIE. You, of all people. You're usually so keen. You never miss a single episode, do you?

MADGE. Never, apart from illness. I've never missed an episode. I must be slipping.

QUEENIE. You must be slipping.

MADGE. I've a lot on my mind.

QUEENIE. Worries?



MADGE. Yes.

QUEENIE. Private matter?

MADGE. It's him.

QUEENIE. What's the matter with him?

MADGE. I don't know. Everything seems too much trouble. Like the lamp-post. Look at him now, where is he? (*Crosses the stage and calls.*) Fred!

QUEENIE. He's in the back with Arthur.

MADGE. All he ever thinks of is messing about with Arthur.

QUEENIE. What are we going to do? (*Shivers.*) It's cold out here.

MADGE. I'm going inside; it's not my business.

*Enter WEBBER.*

WEBBER. Anything wrong?

MADGE. He's gone and left the place to look after itself.

WEBBER. As a matter of fact I want to be alone for a few minutes

—

MADGE. You're always covering up. One of these days you won't be here — and what will he do then?

WEBBER. Excuse me. (*Looks out front.*) Hallo, I was hoping you'd turn up.

SYKES (*from the audience*). I apologise for being late.

WEBBER. Quite all right. Quite all right. Won't you step up here?

SYKES. Is it in order?

WEBBER. You don't mind, do you, Madge?

MADGE. Me? Why should I care? Oh! this wind! I'm going inside

out of it.

WEBBER. If you see him anywhere around, send him out here.

*Exit MADGE and QUEENIE. SYKES climbs to the stage level.*

WEBBER. Good. We shall have the place to ourselves. *(Pause.)* Did you have any trouble finding us?

SYKES. Not a bit. Everyone knows this theatre.

WEBBER. We're quite a landmark. Yes, *quite* a little landmark. *(Pause.)* Are you enjoying yourself?

SYKES. I don't dislike the play. It's charming, really charming – the young woman who plays the wife gives a fine performance.

WEBBER. And yet, you know, I had to speak to her only last night for missing an entrance.

SYKES. It must be difficult to judge when to make one.

WEBBER. Not at all.

SYKES. Oh, I don't know. It must be difficult to time the exact moment when to break in on a scene.

*Enter FRED.*

FRED. Did you want me? oh, am I butting in?

SYKES. That illustrates my point.

WEBBER. Quite, quite. *(To FRED.)* You misjudged an entrance. If you hadn't come in we would have carried on without you. So your entrance wasn't necessary.

FRED. Sorry. Shall I try again?

WEBBER. Later, perhaps. You'd better make the change. We're freezing out here.

FRED *removes the lamp-post and exits.*

SYKES. He's the husband, isn't he?

WEBBER. Yes. Her husband. He was a replacement. We had a bit of trouble with the previous one. Frank – that was his name. An unpleasant business.

SYKES. Is it personal?

FRED *enters dragging on a ramp. He exits and brings on a bath and three sieves.*

WEBBER (*lowering his voice*). You see, Madge said this Frank was too young to be her husband. We had to let him go.

SYKES. How embarrassing.

WEBBER. It's all in the day's work. (*Looks at his watch.*) Well, now I'll just give you a rough outline of the story. Madge and Fred have been married for twelve years; during that time they've had their ups and downs like any other couple, but on the whole they've been happy and contented. They have a delightful daughter called Janice. (*Confidentially.*) I'm Uncle Bill to young Janice. And I'll let you into a secret – we're engaged! She proposed to me in her mummy's dressing room before the show. Delightful! So naive! And completely unspoiled by success. It hasn't affected her a jot. Not a jot. She's still the simple little girl she was before the play opened. (*Pause.*) Ah, that's better. Quite a difference. We're out of that cold wind now. (*Unloosens his scarf and takes off his gloves.*) Janice's daddy, Fred, has become obsessed by the idea that his life is being wasted. This threatens to endanger his marriage. Now, you've seen, haven't you, Madge and Fred at home? Next we'll show you them at work – oh, yes, Madge is a busy modern housewife, does two jobs a day, and so she can't be expected to put up with her husband in the evening, can she? If you'll go back to your seat...

SYKES *does so.*

Are you settled?

SYKES. Yes.

WEBBER. Excellent. Excellent. Then, if you don't mind we could begin.

SYKES. I'm ready for you.

WEBBER. Ready for us? It is we who are ready for you. We're at your service.

*Blackout.*

*Lights up on FRED pushing a boulder before him up the ramp. A SMALL PART PLAYER enters with a notebook and pencil.*

SPP. You seem to have a really worthwhile job here.

FRED. We have our coats off, sir. Work is recognised as a virtue.

SPP. You push this stone –

FRED. Up the hill, sir.

SPP. And what happens then?

FRED. It all depends. It should roll down again. But accidents will happen. Sometimes it topples over the other side.

SPP. Tell me, what made you take up this work?

FRED. The security, sir. And I did want to be a useful member of society. I've worked here since I left school. Twenty-four years, I've worked at this job. Twenty-four years.

SPP. That's good to hear.

FRED. Almost half-way. In another twenty-six years – not long is it, sir? – in twenty-six years I'll be able to retire. I'm making exciting plans for my retirement, sir.

SPP. It won't be long now.

FRED. It isn't long. Oh, the young people of today don't know

what they're missing. They turn up their noses at jobs like this which offer security.

SPP. The industry is failing to attract youth?

FRED. Yes sir, yes. The industry is definitely failing to attract the youth of today.

SPP. Why do you think this is?

FRED. There are many reasons. First I think the young people of today want a job with more glamour. Though this is a rewarding job, sir. We have an excellent pension scheme. When I retire I shall be given a present by the firm, *and* a pension, *and* references in case I should take up part-time work during my retirement.

SPP. I see you have the whole thing at your fingertips.

FRED. I've given the matter a lot of thought.

SPP. Does your wife go out to work?

FRED. Yes, sir. She has a job which is stimulating, interesting and, above all, a benefit to society.

*Lights out on FRED. Lights up on MADGE, QUEENIE and GLADYS. They are dressed in white overalls and are attempting to catch water from the bath in sieves.*

MADGE. Hallo, Queenie, I didn't know you worked here.

QUEENIE. I'm deputising for Enid, she's being taken to court over not paying her telly licence.

MADGE. What a thing to happen.

QUEENIE. She's been asking for it.

GLADYS. There's only one thing I dread –

QUEENIE. We can all guess; it's Short Time.

GLADYS. Imagine! only four hundred sievefuls a day instead of eight hundred.

MADGE. It may never happen.

QUEENIE (*simultaneous*). God's good.

MADGE (*simultaneous*). Look on the bright side.

GLADYS (*simultaneous*). Take the rough with the smooth.

QUEENIE (*simultaneous*). Into each life some rain must fall.

GLADYS. I couldn't bear to be in one of these dead-end jobs. I like to feel I'm doing something useful.

MADGE. I know what you mean.

GLADYS. I'm helping to make the world go round –

*Silence.*

QUEENIE. Enid's mum was ever so shocked about Enid being taken to court.

MADGE. There you are. Pride goes before a fall.

GLADYS. I keep thinking of shorter hours. What if they stopped the overtime?

QUEENIE. Oh, don't!

GLADYS. And put us on shorter hours.

MADGE. Look out, Glad! some of the holes in your sieve are blocked. You'll be catching water in it if you don't watch yourself.

GLADYS. Thanks for the warning. (*Takes out a nail file and unblocks the holes.*) I think I'd go mad if they put us on shorter hours. Nothing to do. Sitting around the house all day. It'd drive me off my rocker.

QUEENIE. Yes.

MADGE. We all do a good day's work and the pay is good.

QUEENIE. It is.

GLADYS. I worry about my Sandra. She wants to take up – WELL!  
You'll think I'm out of my mind if I tell you. I'm sick with  
worry.

MADGE. I'd see someone if I were you.

*Silence.*

QUEENIE. There's something wrong.

*Silence.*

GLADYS. What if they came to you and said, 'Next week you're to  
be allowed four hundred sievefuls and that's your lot?'

QUEENIE. Don't!

MADGE. Do shut up, Glad, you're getting on my nerves.

GLADYS. Shorter hours will come. I'm certain.

QUEENIE. The Grain-Sorters are on short time.

GLADYS. Imagine getting up in the morning and not being able to  
go to work!

MADGE. You'll make your life a misery if you go on like this.

GLADYS. I can't help it.

*A pause while all three sieve silently for a minute or two.*

My Sandra's a big worrit.

MADGE. When does she leave school?

GLADYS. July.

MADGE. She won a scholarship didn't she?

GLADYS. Oh, yes. She's got it in her, there's no doubt. I think  
that's what's at the back of it. (*Pause. In confidence.*) She wants

to be bound to a wheel and to go careering on and on round and round until the day she drops.

QUEENIE. That's a funny job for a woman.

GLADYS. Exactly. My own sentiments. I put all the arguments in favour of taking a nice, sensible job – like this.

QUEENIE (*simultaneous*). It's secure.

MADGE (*simultaneous*). It's steady.

QUEENIE (*simultaneous*). Prospects are good.

MADGE (*simultaneous*). The industry is expanding.

QUEENIE (*simultaneous*). A bonus scheme; lunch vouchers.

MADGE (*simultaneous*). A Sport's Club; recreational facilities.

GLADYS. It's no good. The Wheel is all she cares about.

QUEENIE. It's a man's profession.

MADGE. It's not easy for women to get jobs on the Wheel.

QUEENIE. Jobs for women are scarce. Whereas the chances of women making a success of water-sieving are good.

GLADYS. Why are all the Wheelers men?

QUEENIE. And the Straw-Spinners?

GLADYS. And the Cloud-Predictors?

MADGE. And Apple-Graspers, and Oath-Takers and Corpse-Judgers?

*Silence.*

GLADYS. I don't know which way to turn.

QUEENIE. Well, I call it a –

MADGE. – silly idea –



QUEENIE. You've spoiled her, Glad –

MADGE. – spared the rod –

QUEENIE. – and spoiled the child.

MADGE. And God only knows you've done that. Spoiled her until she thinks she's the mistress of the house and not you. Now if I were in your shoes I'd put her in the Winding-Sheet business.

GLADYS. It's more than my life's worth to suggest it.

MADGE. You won't find a nicer job.

GLADYS. It's the night-work; she just won't listen. If it means the night-shift she's –

QUEENIE. She's spoilt.

GLADYS. It's her being a girl after boys; a rose between two thorns they said when she was born.

MADGE. You've made your bed and you must lie on it.

*A bell rings loudly.*

QUEENIE. Five and twenty past! How time flies.

MADGE. Thank God it's Saturday tomorrow. I'm no friend of the man who invented work.

GLADYS. What would we do without it?

*They form a queue at the clock holding clock-cards in their hands. The dialogue is played as they wait for the clock to reach five-thirty.*

QUEENIE. Anna Neagle's on tonight.

GLADYS. – lovely *she* was.

MADGE. – lovely. Yes, lovely. I remember her years ago.

GLADYS. Years ago.

MADGE. I remember her.

QUEENIE. Did you see the original?

GLADYS. No, not the original. I saw the revival after the war.

QUEENIE. Yes, they did a revival, I believe.

GLADYS. Oh, yes. How old do you take me for? See the original?  
My mother saw the original. But I saw it when they revived  
her.

*A clock strikes the half-hour.*

GLADYS. Here! where's the clock?

VOICES IN THE QUEUE. Come on, Glad, what are you playing at?  
We want to get home sometime tonight.

GLADYS. What have they done?

VOICES. Get a move on. What's the matter with you? Don't you  
want to leave, Glad?

*Enter FRED, out of breath, pushing a clock.*

MADGE. About time too.

QUEENIE. Never mind, dear, we all love you.

*They clock out.*

MADGE. I suppose you'll be home about six?

FRED. They've asked me to do overtime.

MADGE. You'd better. It'll come in handy for Janice's new shoes.  
I'll keep your dinner hot.

*FRED removes the bath and the sieves and ramp. He brings on the  
two chairs and puts the lamp-post between them in the position of*

*the standard lamp of the opening scene.*

*Light on MADGE and QUEENIE.*

He needs a tonic. Maybe he'd be more cheerful. But the funny thing is he's not interested; everybody ought to be interested in tonics at his age. So morbid he's getting too. We were having a constitutional in the recreation ground at the weekend, and he passed the men playing bowls – well, live and let live, I always say, bowls passes the time. 'You'd think they'd find something better to do,' he says. And the man got quite upset. 'You'll be dead soon.' Dead. And Death. That's all he thinks of. They weren't doing any harm, having a game of bowls. He told me they gave him the pip; nothing on their minds except the rates and no pleasures except the pools and the latest case of incest in the papers. So *he* says. They're not even alive, at least not what anyone who was alive would call alive. They're dead. But you can't go around telling people they're dead without annoying them, can you?

QUEENIE. He needs a good tonic; try him on Parish's Food, that's good.

*QUEENIE exits. MADGE sits in a chair. The doorbell rings. She gets up and goes off. Sound of door slamming. She re-enters with WEBBER.*

MADGE. He's not home yet.

WEBBER. He's late, isn't he?

MADGE. They asked him to do overtime.

WEBBER (*pause*). How's life treating you?

MADGE. So, so.

WEBBER. Like that is it?

MADGE. I'm under the weather; it's the time of year.

WEBBER. How's that daughter of yours?

MADGE. Janice? I've put her to bed, she's had a tiring day. We're having her trained, you know?

WEBBER. Are you?

MADGE. It was his idea. I wasn't too keen. There you are. A proud father and all that.

WEBBER *notices the lamp-post between the two chairs.*

WEBBER. Hallo, was this his idea?

MADGE (*seeing it for the first time*). Oh – I copied it from one of the women's magazines. Like it?

WEBBER. Hm. Did it cost much?

MADGE. No more than an ordinary lamp, and the litter basket comes in handy.

WEBBER. We must keep up with the times.

MADGE. We must be modern.

WEBBER. Up to date. (*Looks at his watch.*) He is late.

*Silence.* WEBBER *comes to the edge of the stage.*

Everything okay?

SYKES. I'd like a drink.

WEBBER. We'll do a few cuts then. (*To MADGE.*) Miss the scene in the park, and the one in the launderette, and the one where Janice gets lost, and the one where Fred threatens to leave you for the first time.

MADGE. What about the scene where I leave him?

WEBBER. Cut that. Cut the one where Janice has her first exam, and the one where the bats escape, and the one where Queenie brings you and Fred together.

MADGE. If you say so. (*Pause. As WEBBER exits.*) You can find

your own way out, can you?

WEBBER. Yes.

*Exit.*

MADGE *sits down*. FRED *enters*. He *sits down*.

FRED. Are we in the mood for talking?

MADGE. Where have you been?

FRED. Out. (*Pause.*) I'm going to leave you.

MADGE. Why?

FRED. I'm bored.

MADGE. You have no reason to be.

FRED. I'm bored with the way you open the door. I'm bored with the way you get into bed. I'm bored with the way you get out of bed. And the way you use the bed. I'm bored with the pillowslips, and the counterpane, and the sheets and the eiderdown. I'm bored with that picture of a cat's wedding hanging over the bed, and I'm going to smash the alarm clock which plays 'Oh, What a Beautiful Morning' beside the bed!

MADGE. No you won't.

FRED. I will. Where have you put it? You've hidden it.

MADGE. Oh! Oh, dear! Fred! Fred! Don't do it. We shan't be able to wake up. I'm frightened, I've never seen you like this. I like the clock.

FRED. I hate it.

MADGE. It's cheerful. I like 'Oh, What a Beautiful Morning'.

FRED. Cheerful?

MADGE. Cheerful, yes.

FRED. Not for me.

MADGE. Why not?

FRED. Because it's morning, that's why. Because it's seven o'clock, that's why. Where is it? I'm going to smash it.

MADGE. Leave it alone. I won't have you behaving like this. You'll wake Janice.

FRED. I'm going to smash it to hell. (*Pause.*) Smash it. Smash it. All those wheels going round and round and round –

MADGE. The craftsmanship takes your breath away. It's a work of art.

FRED. – round and round and round; eating my life away. And the dome on top with the dancer inside.

MADGE. Think of the time it took to make anything so perfect!

FRED. I'm going to smash the dome with the dancer inside. Smash it. Smash it. Smash those bleeding little wheels.

MADGE. It's a lovely piece of work. So elaborate. So decorative.

FRED. In the morning I hear it playing, and I get up –

MADGE. – you get up.

FRED. I stretch myself.

MADGE. And I say, What time is it, dear? (*Pause.*) It's a sacred moment.

FRED. Then –

MADGE. – you say –

FRED. – about seven, dear.

MADGE. So kind you always are to me. It must take a lot of patient searching to find the time. You're a good husband.

Nothing is too much trouble. (*Pause.*) Well, carry on.

FRED. I put on my shirt.

MADGE. You've no idea of the funny feeling I get inside as I watch you take off your pyjama jacket. I watch too long. I've been over-exciting myself lately. That's why I'm so tired all day.

FRED. And then –

MADGE. – then –

FRED (*quickly*). Then I take off my trousers!

MADGE. I never dare to look. It's so personal. I close my eyes and hear you say –

FRED. – two lumps as usual, dear?

MADGE. Yes. You say –

FRED. – two lumps as usual, dear.

MADGE. We lead a deeply human life. There's no getting away from it. So moving and quietly sincere.

FRED (*pause*). I'm beginning to get excited by it.

MADGE. I knew you would. I knew you'd be struck by the solemnity of everyday life.

FRED. The Formality! I'd never realised.

MADGE. It's classical in its simplicity. (*Pause.*) Oh, the beauty of it, dear, the beauty of it. Have you ever considered that? We're not just part of a mass, you and I. No. We're joined to a living integral whole, a warm, pulsating body bound together; you, me, and Mr Macmillan and Mr Lennox-Boyd and Lord Hailsham and Mr Cotton and Mr Clore, all bound together in a wonderful experience called LIVING. (*Pause.*) So – poetic – don't you think?

FRED (*amazed*). Madge, dear, Madge.

MADGE. You didn't know I had a touch of the –

FRED. Madge.

MADGE. – poet, did you dear?

FRED. Madge.

MADGE. You didn't know I had that side. It's the –

FRED. Madge.

MADGE. – dark of the moon. Everyone is a moon and has a dark side which they show to no one.

FRED. Madge!

MADGE. These are the quiet thoughts that come to me in the morning as I wait for you to bring me my cup of tea –

FRED. – with two lumps of sugar.

MADGE. – small lumps, yes.

FRED (*impressed*). Your cup of tea!

MADGE. I've revealed new and unsuspected realms of imagination, of unique and lasting value in our marriage. These little thoughts of mine, and much more, show my awed recognition of the mystery at the heart of *life*.

FRED. Life.

MADGE. – life –

FRED. Life.

MADGE. – life –

FRED. – the poetry and savagery of it! Oh!

*Silence.*



MADGE (*reminding him*). And you go –

FRED. – down the stairs. And I see the holes in the carpet, and the stain on the wall where Janice upset her po, and the green paint on the banisters.

MADGE. The mat in the hall; the letter box.

FRED. – with the morning paper pushed through it.

MADGE. It's an experience, seeing our hall in the dawn, as the sun rises. All that light coming ninety-three million miles through space to shine on our Welcome mat.

FRED. And the barometer Queenie gave us as a wedding present.

MADGE. And the shoe cupboard.

FRED. And the stair-rods from Woolworths.

MADGE. And the picture from the Medici gallery.

FRED. It makes you think. (*Pause.*) Ninety-three million miles through space to shine on our kitchen and the cups you forgot to wash the night before.

MADGE. When we win the pools I'm going to buy a machine to do it. We'll have no bother any more.

FRED. Think of the millions who don't win every week; millions like us.

MADGE. I'm desperately concerned about the money; desperately concerned.

FRED. What good is the money if your heart is broken?

MADGE. Will it make us hard? I keep asking myself, will it alter our lives: our unhurried way of life?

FRED. Will it make us bitter?

MADGE. The cocktails and laughter; will they spoil us?

FRED. I couldn't stand it if we were spoiled.

MADGE. We must make a determined effort not to let our new-found wealth affect us – but we must have serviettes with our meals. Now that's a thing I shall insist on.

FRED. It doesn't bring happiness.

MADGE. No.

FRED. The rich are probably as poor as we are if truth were only known.

MADGE. Oh, dear!

FRED. What good is wealth if you're living a life that's a mockery?

MADGE. Oh, dear!

FRED. If you never know who's your friend? Is it worth it? If you don't know which way to turn? You have a big house and grounds and servants and holidays in the south of France and all the time there's bitterness and regret in your heart; poor little rich girl, that's what you'll be. It's not worth the risk.

MADGE. You're trying to put me off.

FRED. Those weekends at Mrs Gerald Legge's and the horses and you'll never look right in a Dior – and if you put two and two together with Uffa Fox you'll be seasick. And then there's the entertaining –

MADGE. You make it sound awful.

FRED. – a terrible lot of entertaining there'll be, and bridge and the Chelsea Flower Show and Church on Sunday and Scotland for the grouse; you know how you hate them –

MADGE. Please stop.

FRED. I'll have to wear a bowler and carry a tightly rolled

umbrella; what will the neighbours say?

MADGE. I don't know what's the matter with you, you've never been like this before.

FRED. I'm warning you.

MADGE. I get so tired of it all, so desperately tired. I'm unhappy.

FRED. Why?

MADGE. You're leaving me.

FRED. It's this social whirl; I'm not used to it. There's the Royal Enclosure, and Janice – she'll be coming out soon.

MADGE. Fred!

FRED. We'll have to go to a Garden Party. And it's so difficult to get floral gowns and those big hats – and what about grass stains on your gloves, eh? Have you thought about them? I don't suppose you have. That's your trouble. Thoughtless. It's almost impossible to get grass stains from white gloves.

MADGE. I won't go then.

FRED. Won't go! Do you know what you're saying?

MADGE. I'm not being made a fool of.

FRED. And how do you think Janice will feel? It's not as if she asks a favour every day. What chance has she got of being voted 'Deb of the Year' if you behave like this? You'll ruin her first season if you're not careful.

MADGE. Don't let me stop you going. I'm sure you're dying to be with the others.

*Silence.*

FRED. I suppose we could try Thawpitt.

MADGE. You care more about those gloves than you do about me.

*Enter WEBBER carrying an alarm clock which is ringing.*

WEBBER. For Heaven's sake! get on with it! We'll be here all night.

*Exit.*

MADGE (*hastily*). Goodbye then.

FRED. I'll always love you.

MADGE. It's a pity we couldn't make a go of it.

FRED. I'm going to kiss you, and then I want you to turn away.  
You won't see me leave.

MADGE. What a nice idea.

FRED. Do you like it?

MADGE. It suits you down to the ground.

FRED. It's not an original.

MADGE. I think it's every bit as good; nobody could tell the difference.

*She turns. He kisses her on the neck and exits.*

Queenie and that friend of hers had a nasty experience yesterday. They were walking down the road when one of Queenie's heels came off. She could have broken her neck, she fell from such a height. (*Pause.*) Take care of yourself dear. I know you're not here any more so I can break down. (*Cries.*) Fred – Fred –

*Enter WEBBER. He walks to the edge of the stage and speaks briskly to SYKES.*

WEBBER. There! that's over with. Now if you want a drink, follow me.

*They make an exit to the bar. Lights up.*

*Exit.*

*The curtain does not fall.*

*End of Act One.*

## ACT TWO

*The stage is as at the end of Act One. After the fire-curtain has risen, SYKES comes hurriedly from the bar, or the direction of the bar, and climbs to the stage level. WEBBER enters and they remove everything onstage. They bring on two single beds and a locker and a wooden chair of the kind used in hospitals. Inside the locker are two bunches of flowers which WEBBER removes and takes offstage, and a water jug and two glasses which he places on top of the locker.*

*Fade house lights. Silence. WEBBER sits on a bed and mops his brow.*

WEBBER. The staff problem gets worse.

SYKES. Fred left then?

WEBBER. Good God, yes! We haven't heard a word from him since Madge got her divorce.

SYKES. How is she?

WEBBER. Not too bad, all things considered. He never writes, you know. She got a card one Christmas to say he'd taken a job abroad. (*Pause.*) Did you ever meet her father?

SYKES. Can't say I remember.

WEBBER. He's in hospital, not expected to see the year out. (*Pause.*) And Queenie – you remember her?

SYKES. I should think I do.

WEBBER. She married an Indian. There was a lot of talk, I can tell

you. She's going to Sutpura with him. Entering his harem and all that. She signed the papers. (*Pause.*) And Gladys – she was the one with the glasses – Gladys passed away a couple of years ago. Dropped dead at work. Strained herself everyone said. (*Pause.*) And that's all from me. What have you to say for yourself?

SYKES. I spent my time in the bar over the way.

WEBBER (*shocked*). The last five years? In a bar? You must be soaking it up.

SYKES. There you are. Mustn't complain, I suppose.

WEBBER. Seen a doctor?

SYKES. Dozens of them.

WEBBER. I hope you'll be able to give me a hand – a bit of lifting? Good. Here we go again.

WEBBER *and* SYKES *exit*.

*Sound of visitors arriving. The SMALL PART PLAYER crosses the stage dressed as a nurse.*

*Enter FRED and MADGE, who each get into a bed. They both settle down, mutter to themselves, and turn over. He sits up and reaches for the water jug. She does the same. An orchestra somewhere strikes up a romantic little tune. Reaching for the water, they see one another.*

MADGE. What are *you* doing here?

FRED. A bit of an accident on my way to get married; I ought to be on my honeymoon.

MADGE. So should I.

FRED. What happened?

MADGE. We had an accident too. The church roof came in on top

of us.

FRED. That's the trouble with churches nowadays; it's suicide to enter them. (*Pause.*) How is Janice keeping?

MADGE. She polishes beautifully. She's a born Cleansing Agent. So talented! (*Pause.*) Listen! Our tune!

FRED. I know.

*Silence.*

Have you known – him – for long?

MADGE. About six years. I never realised his feelings until a few months ago. (*Pause.*) It was a whirlwind courtship, when I took Janice to Norfolk to convalesce.

FRED. Norfolk?

MADGE. Yes.

FRED. Very hilly Norfolk.

MADGE. Hills! – oh! the climbing we had to do. Up and down, up and down, all day long. I got worried for Janice's health. She's been poorly lately.

FRED. Ill?

MADGE. She overtaxed her strength working for this carpet beating exam she's so keen on passing. (*Pause.*) What about – her – you didn't tell me her name.

FRED. Susan.

MADGE. How old is she?

FRED. Sixteen last week.

MADGE (*pause*). I do think – I do think you might have waited. She'll hardly have had time to mature.



FRED. She's a big girl. (*Pause.*) How old is –

MADGE. Jimmy.

FRED. How old is Jimmy?

MADGE. Sixty-one.

FRED (*incredulous*). Sixty-one! (*Pause.*) I'd never have believed it.  
You, of all people, going around with that type of man.

MADGE. He's very dynamic.

FRED. He must be.

MADGE. That's what first attracted me to him. We were doing a  
spot of climbing –

FRED. – in Norfolk –

MADGE. Yes. We were more or less amusing ourselves, Janice  
and I, until she lost her alpenstock, and we found ourselves  
stranded. With night coming on, and reports of avalanches, we  
were terrified, when, out of nowhere, came Jimmy. Suave,  
immaculate, devil-may-care, the epitome of all that a lonely  
woman could desire. *And* he had two alpenstocks. So he  
loaned one to Janice and helped us back to the chalet. (*Pause.*)  
He proposed to me next day.

*Silence. The music plays on.*

FRED. I've gone off that tune.

*Silence.*

MADGE. What have you been doing lately; you never write.

FRED. I joined the Merchant Navy.

MADGE. Like it?

FRED. Not much.

MADGE. China must be interesting.

FRED. We called at Hong Kong once. I didn't go ashore, though.

MADGE. And Japan.

FRED. Some of the lads enjoyed it.

MADGE. Did you go to India? And see the Taj Mahal?

FRED. Oh, yes! now that is something special. It's unbelievable – like a huge biscuit box. You'd have loved it.

*Silence.*

MADGE. Queenie married an Indian chap, did you hear?

FRED. Yes.

MADGE. She's leaving soon to take up residence in the Palace of the Mogul Emperors at Sutpura. I can't fancy the place myself, but she's looking forward to it. (*Pause.*) She wanted to take young Janice, because there'll be all those rooms to clean. I wouldn't hear of it. Janice is at the start of her career; it wouldn't be fair to her. (*Pause.*) What's the good of a Diploma in polishing if the floors are made of stone? No sense in it. So I put my foot down.

FRED. When is Queenie leaving?

MADGE. The end of the year. She's taking lessons in nude-dancing, and getting used to cobras – we have the spare room full of them.

FRED. Have you?

MADGE. I thought that'd interest you.

FRED. Remember the bats?

MADGE. Shall I ever forget the trouble we had when they escaped?

FRED. I'm sorry, dear.

MADGE. I never regret our marriage, Fred.

*The SMALL PART PLAYER enters with two thermometers, which he puts into their mouths.*

SPP (*taking the thermometer out again*). You're okay now, Fred.

FRED. Can I get up?

SPP. Nothing wrong with *you*.

FRED *exits*. *The SMALL PART PLAYER tidies the bed.*

Let me just have a look at that thermometer. (*Does so.*) You'll have to stay in for a few days longer.

MADGE. When is visiting day?

SPP. Why? Are you expecting anyone?

MADGE. Fred promised to look in.

*Enter FRED with a bunch of flowers. Exit the SMALL PART PLAYER.*

FRED. Hallo, dear, feeling better?

MADGE. I am now. What lovely flowers!

FRED. They are nice, aren't they? I'll leave them here. Nurse can see to them.

MADGE. How was the wedding?

FRED. We put it off; Susan's down with jaundice.

MADGE. What a shame.

*Enter WEBBER also with a bunch of flowers.*

Jimmy! I thought you couldn't make it?

WEBBER. I wangled half-an-hour.

MADGE. Look who's here.

WEBBER. Fred! when did you blow in?

MADGE. A few days ago.

FRED. Long time no see?

MADGE. He's getting married soon.

WEBBER. Married, eh? Try and try again?

*Silence.*

FRED. So you're the Jimmy I've heard so much about?

WEBBER. Surprised?

FRED. I certainly am.

*Silence.*

WEBBER. You've given up the Merchant Navy then?

FRED. For the time being.

WEBBER. Care to have your old job back? We could do with an extra hand; someone with experience.

FRED. I'll take it on for a trial run.

WEBBER. Suits me.

FRED. When would you like me to start?

WEBBER. No time like the present. You'll find Sykes outside, he'll put you in the picture. (*Exit FRED.*) I'm having to get rid of Sykes. Drinks like a fish. Can't leave the stuff alone. Do you know, he spent the best part of five years in a bar? Shocking really.

MADGE. I'm sorry for his poor wife, what a time she must have.

*Enter SYKES.*

SYKES. I'm off then.

WEBBER. Don't forget the little job you promised to do, will you?

SYKES. No.

*He exits to his seat in the audience, slightly drunk.*

WEBBER. He reeks of whisky!

MADGE. He can't help it.

WEBBER. Perhaps you're right. *(Pause.)* I've brought these for you.

MADGE. Aren't they lovely! Leave them there. Nurse will know what to do with them.

*Silence.*

WEBBER *(tenderly)*. How are you, my darling?

MADGE. Very happy.

WEBBER. The Vicar has agreed to damages.

MADGE. He was as upset as we were.

WEBBER. What if you'd been killed?

MADGE. *You* might have been killed too.

WEBBER. No danger for me, dearest. I was at the altar; it was the cherubim over the aisle which fell.

MADGE. My gown – my lovely gown! *(Bursts into tears.)*

WEBBER. There, dear, there! We'll get another every bit as good. As long as you are safe.

*He takes her in his arms. Slow fade. Enter FRED with a chair. He places it in position and fetches the other. MADGE gets out of bed and exits, returning dressed. She sits in one of the chairs and*

*remains seated until she is needed.*

Ready for work? That's what I like to see.

FRED. Could you lend me a hand with the beds?

*WEBBER and FRED remove the beds, the locker and flowers, etc., and bring on the standard lamp, and any wedding presents which may be mentioned later. Enter downstage QUEENIE and the actress who played GLADYS.*

QUEENIE. Excuse me for saying this, but how is it you look so similar to poor Gladys?

GLADYS. I'm her twin sister.

QUEENIE. That was lucky.

GLADYS. More good management than luck, if you ask me.

QUEENIE (*impressed*). You've got Gladys's manner to a T! Why announce her death? You could have stepped in, and no one would have been the wiser.

GLADYS. There you are. That's the way it goes.

QUEENIE. What's your name?

GLADYS. Gladys.

QUEENIE. What a coincidence.

*Silence.*

GLADYS. Now it's my turn to ask the questions. Are there any vacancies?

QUEENIE. What do you mean?

GLADYS. You let something out back there. Not much, but enough for me to gather that there might be one or two jobs going. I could see you didn't want to talk then –

QUEENIE. I still don't.

GLADYS. You mustn't be like that.

QUEENIE. It's a personal matter.

GLADYS (*admiringly*). You're a dark horse, Queenie, and no mistake.

QUEENIE. I'll say this for you, you're out for what's going.

GLADYS. Here, steady on! I've got my feelings. Nobody likes to be insulted, and to their face.

QUEENIE. A joke's a joke.

GLADYS. I wouldn't have brought it up in the normal way, but I'm getting tired of water-sieving day after day, week after week, and I can't face grain-sorting or unpicking shrouds, or apple-grasping; and wheeling and straw-spinning and feather-painting and cloud-predicting are men's jobs. I'd try over-reaching myself but I'm not an educated woman. So I thought a job in a harem might suit me down to the ground.

QUEENIE. He's only advertising for concubines.

GLADYS. Beggars can't be choosers.

QUEENIE. You'd have to see Ramakrishna.

GLADYS. Can you fix me an appointment?

QUEENIE. I'll do my best.

GLADYS. You're an angel, Queenie.

*Exit GLADYS.*

*Lights up on MADGE. QUEENIE walks into the light and sits upon a chair. SYKES makes his way from the audience.*

QUEENIE. Gladys went to a Catholic wedding last week; she said it was like a funfair.

MADGE. They're so passionate.

QUEENIE. The first time she'd been invited to one, and oh! my –

MADGE. They make such a lot of it.

QUEENIE. People coming and going and putting money in the box and lighting candles –

MADGE. What I might call –

QUEENIE. She said she thought they'd set the place afire.

MADGE. – what I might call unrestrained.

QUEENIE. What? I'll say.

MADGE (*taking up a list which says quite plainly GUESTS*). Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Such a lot of people there'll be coming to the wedding. Where are we going to seat them?

QUEENIE. I always say there's nothing like a C of E wedding for sheer SACREDNESS, and –

MADGE. I can see someone having his wedding breakfast in the loo.

QUEENIE. HOLY QUIET.

MADGE. Yes.

QUEENIE (*absently, examines the presents*). Ramakrishna can't be here, he's had to go and organise a tiger shoot for somebody. What are these? – sugar tongs?

MADGE. They are nice.

QUEENIE. Asparagus tongs. You never eat any.

MADGE. It's a nice thought; it's the thought that matters.

QUEENIE. You have some lovely presents. When did these come?



MADGE. By registered post.

QUEENIE. A wig-scraper, six demon spoons, a stuffed owl, a nanny-goat's postiche, an ear (oh, you are lucky, it's got a flea in it), a fully automatic oubliette, an artificial chin, a yard of linoleum –

MADGE. That once belonged to Sir Malcolm Sargent.

QUEENIE. Who sent this wicker coffin?

MADGE. Wally and Joan.

QUEENIE. It's just what you wanted!

MADGE. Don't touch the string of pearls whatever you do; Olive sent it and she forgot to wrap them in greaseproof paper.

*Silence. SYKES climbs to the stage level and sits down.*

QUEENIE. It's such a pity Janice is busy at Windsor Castle. What a boon she'd be at the wedding.

MADGE. Yes.

QUEENIE. What a treasure.

MADGE (to SYKES). She was a waitress in her spare time, you know?

QUEENIE. She'd be a great help with plates.

MADGE. She could serve three people at once.

QUEENIE. She'll have lost the knack.

MADGE. Yes.

QUEENIE. She could have laid the table very nice.

MADGE. I wish she'd oblige; give a helping hand.

QUEENIE. She was good with serviettes.

MADGE. – beautiful.

QUEENIE. It looked so easy, yet the way she did it –

MADGE. They looked so –

QUEENIE. PROFESSIONAL –

MADGE. – yet homely –

QUEENIE. So –

MADGE. ELEGANT –

QUEENIE. – yet with a careless savoir-faire. Janice is the kind of person who is a must at a wedding.

SYKES. What was your other wedding like?

MADGE. You could hardly call it a wedding last time. He had a sudden impulse and we decided to use it and get married.

SYKES. Just like that?

MADGE. Just like that.

QUEENIE. I've still got a soft spot for old Fred.

MADGE (*moving off*). Really? Why don't you invite him to tea or something? (*Exit.*)

*Silence.*

QUEENIE. She should never have divorced him.

SYKES. They didn't hit it off, did they?

QUEENIE. The bats came between them.

SYKES. I don't know the details.

QUEENIE. He kept vampires and she saw red because they'd had a lot of trouble with them on their honeymoon. It was in all the papers when they escaped.

SYKES. By the way, I've heard your husband will be getting his name in the papers before long.

QUEENIE. What?

SYKES. They're publishing his story in serial form; his formative years next week, how he threw the bishop to the crocodiles, and let the python loose on the Viceroy's wife, and chained his mother to the ant-hill.

QUEENIE. I can't think what's come over everybody, wanting to read about people's private affairs. What are we going to do? We must stop publication. If Fred were here he'd think of something.

*She pauses, then goes to the telephone and dials. As she does so FRED crosses the stage carrying a brightly painted kettle from which protrude the tails of several fish. QUEENIE replaces the receiver.*

I was going to give you a ring. Madge told me to invite you to tea.

FRED. Thanks. I'll be seeing you. (*Exit.*)

QUEENIE. We ought to do something. There's such a thing as privacy.

*Enter MADGE.*

MADGE. Who were you talking to?

QUEENIE. It was a wrong number.

SYKES. But would Fred sympathise? After all he's an animal lover.

QUEENIE. Since when?

SYKES. Look at the bats.

QUEENIE. He only took up animal loving out of boredom. Didn't

he Madge?

MADGE. Oh, yes. He'd much sooner have been an animal hater but we couldn't afford it.

*Enter WEBBER.*

WEBBER (*jovially*). No need to tell me what you were talking about, I've been listening at the keyhole.

QUEENIE. I don't see why, you were perfectly welcome to join in the conversation.

WEBBER. I know the man who runs the Sunday papers; I worked for him once. Having heard a rumour or two, I went to see him in his office high above the city. I had a little chat. (*Pause.*) And I fixed everything. (*Pause.*) There, what do you say to that?

*An astonished silence.*

QUEENIE (*startled. In a worried half-whisper*). He's cut something. I don't understand what's going on.

SYKES (*explaining*). The man who owns the Sunday papers has threatened to publish an article of which we all disapprove. Webber has been to see him to buy him off. Is that right?

WEBBER. Yes.

QUEENIE. How?

WEBBER. Wait and see.

*Enter the OLD MAN dressed as a butler.*

What is it, Wilkins?

OLD MAN. Dr Petrie and the young lady say they'll be down directly, sir.

WEBBER. Thank you, Wilkins. Tell Winifred or Mary to look after the young lady, will you?

OLD MAN. Very good, sir. (*Exit.*)

*Silence.*

MADGE. I'm not satisfied that Dad is well enough to work. He's not getting any younger.

QUEENIE. It'll take him out of himself.

MADGE. It isn't right – an old man of his age, just out of hospital, having to work for his living, polishing the silver, running up and down stairs, answering the door and telephone. It isn't good enough, Queenie. You always were inconsiderate.

QUEENIE. He gets paid.

MADGE. That's beside the point.

*Silence.*

SYKES. Who are Dr Petrie and the young lady?

WEBBER. Harry Petrie is his name. And Grace Oldbourne. I invited them to the wedding.

MADGE. You asked people here to stay?

QUEENIE. You behave in a very high-handed manner.

MADGE. Grace Oldbourne, I'm sure I've heard of her. She's a – honestly Jimmy, you go too far! She insults people. She's an insultrix.

WEBBER. Yes.

MADGE. And a famous one.

WEBBER. It might be nice to have a few original insults at the wedding.

MADGE. Why are they coming?

WEBBER. They're a nice couple. She's an artist in her own line,

and he's written a couple of books – we ought to meet more people.

MADGE. I know what it is – the Sunday papers have sent them.  
You can't deny it, can you?

WEBBER. No.

MADGE. Well, they can go right back again.

QUEENIE. I think it's taking a liberty. You ought to have asked permission first; it isn't fair.

WEBBER. Let me explain. When I had a talk with my old boss who runs the Sunday papers, he promised not to print Ramakrishna's life story if you would allow Dr Petrie and Miss Oldbourne carte blanche to insult your guests, with first offers of publication.

MADGE. You must be out of your mind!

QUEENIE. It's taking a mean advantage.

MADGE. Why pick on us? Other people get married every day.

QUEENIE. Yes – why not the MacDougals? Sally MacDougal had a lovely little insult paid to her the other day – *she* won't mind.

WEBBER. There's your marriage, I think that's what the public wants; nobody cares if Miss Oldbourne insults Sally MacDougal, but if she insults a Maharanee – that's news!

MADGE. It's awful.

WEBBER. You'll try and cooperate, dear?

MADGE. Only for Queenie's sake. I know she'd never raise her head again if the crocodile story leaked out.

QUEENIE. I don't know what things are coming to.

MADGE. The best thing to do is to pretend nothing has happened.  
Queenie, you'd better come with me – I haven't unpacked all

the presents.

WEBBER. No, no. You must wait. I daresay we shall be needed before long.

*Light down, and up on DR PETRIE and MISS OLDBOURNE.  
MISS OLDBOURNE has a box hanging from her shoulder by a strap.*

PETRIE. This is the dining room. I suppose we shall be expected to work in here?

OLDBOURNE. It looks as though we'll be able to manage one or two surprises.

PETRIE. No question of it.

OLDBOURNE. Are you intending to concentrate or to insult all and sundry?

PETRIE. You're too impatient by half, Grace. I must spy out the land first. We can't rush at these things like a bull at a gate. You know that as well as I do.

OLDBOURNE. Sorry, Harry.

PETRIE. I imagine the free-orbit insult might be called for here – it's a small wedding, nothing spectacular.

OLDBOURNE. I remember you used the free-orbit insult at the Kent wedding with some very satisfying results.

PETRIE. What a triumph!

OLDBOURNE. The peak of your career!

PETRIE. You didn't do too badly yourself.

OLDBOURNE. It was your day, though.

PETRIE. Never mind, Grace, you were the innovator. No one had thought of insulting the catering staff until you did.

OLDBOURNE. It was an accident, really.

PETRIE. An accident!

OLDBOURNE. I'd just leaned over in order to insult the bride's father when – bang! a footman bumps into me and I misfire.

PETRIE. It doesn't matter how it was done, the result was remarkable. The effect on the other guests couldn't have been calculated. It was one of those lucky breaks every insultor or insultrix prays for.

*Lights up on the rest of the cast.*

Oh, hello, here you are.

WEBBER. Everyone wants to welcome you.

ALL. A right royal welcome to Dr Petrie and Miss Grace.

OLDBOURNE. Thank you, thank you.

PETRIE (*to MADGE*). My colleague and I give you our heartfelt good wishes.

MADGE. You're both so kind. It's going to be nice having you.

OLDBOURNE. Charming of you to say so.

MADGE. I don't know what kind of people you usually choose – our guests are ordinary people, they have no brains to speak of – except my uncle Bob, but he'll give no trouble.

PETRIE (*making a note*). Ordinary people except B. Just a reminder.

QUEENIE. Give us a trial. Insult someone.

OLDBOURNE. I don't think –

QUEENIE. Oh, go on, just to oblige.

MADGE. I'm sure we'd all be delighted.



PETRIE. Whom shall it be?

MADGE. Anybody.

OLDBOURNE (*in a quiet professional manner to PETRIE*). Give them the all-purpose group insult.

PETRIE. I make only one stipulation – the people selected must be pig-headed enough to withstand insult; I won't have anyone seriously injured.

WEBBER. We accept your stipulation.

PETRIE. Grace, dear, you take the women, I'll take the men.

OLDBOURNE *and* PETRIE *move to the centre of the stage.*  
PETRIE *pulls out a starter's pistol, lifts it and fires.*

SYKES. Agatha Christie.

MADGE. Audrey Russell.

QUEENIE. Joan Littlewood.

WEBBER. Edith Sitwell.

OLDBOURNE. They are the biggest blow to culture since the burning of the library at Alexandria.

*The whole cast applauds.*

QUEENIE (*in great excitement, running to the side of the stage*). Fred! Dad! Come and watch this. Hurry or you'll miss it.

*Enter the OLD MAN, GLADYS, the SMALL PART PLAYER and FRED.*

You must watch. I've seen nothing like it.

PETRIE *lifts his starter's pistol and fires.*

ALL. The BBC.

*Silence.*

OLDBOURNE. Extraordinary! (*Pause.*) I'm afraid –

PETRIE (*abruptly*). Be quiet, Grace!

OLDBOURNE. Harry! please! not again! – remember your doctor's advice. Unless you give up insulting the British Broadcasting Corporation, he will not answer for the state of your health.

PETRIE. Leave me alone! I can't resist it. I'm carried away by the thought of those infantile, nepotic liars, time-serving good taste with as much slobber as a savage his totem or fetish. They are a tumour on the life of the nation, with their intolerable middleness; mediocre, so-so, medium, second-rate; neither fish nor fowl; flat, stale and unprofitable; depressing to the acute and the dull, at loggerheads with lack-wits and men of learning, with shining lights and crack-brains. Not pleasing the one or the other. Cricket-playing, doctrinaire, accepting; stupid, arid, Christians, running mad, amok, berserk, doting, frantic with taste, befooled, infatuate with delicacy and middle-of-the-road decorum. They please no party, faction, side, class, set or crowd, except their own sacred band of jumped-up fairy-godmothers.

OLDBOURNE. You mustn't be so angry, Harry. You're not a young man any more.

PETRIE. I can't help it! I can't! Is rage the prerogative of youth? Must we cool with the years and die when our blood has chilled to the temperature of the society around us? Should we tolerate gradual freezing of our anger, watch bitterness and pain drugged into insensibility? Is anger so rare a specific that only the young must have access to it? (*Pause.*) No! We must hurt the feelings of our enemies, infuriate those we dislike, and never cease to delight in bringing the hornet's nest about our ears!

*Silence.*

MADGE. You'll be an asset at the wedding.

QUEENIE. Does it take long to learn the trade?

OLDBOURNE. It depends on the type of person.

GLADYS. My niece, Sandra, is still looking for a job. I wonder if she'd be interested.

MADGE. She couldn't do better than come to the wedding. I'm sure Dr Petrie and Miss Oldbourne wouldn't mind.

PETRIE. Not at all. We believe individuals should fulfil themselves as completely as possible.

*The SMALL PART PLAYER brings on a soapbox upon which PETRIE stands.*

Work, since it occupies so much of one's time, should be a source of pleasure as well as a means of earning a living; and most human beings are happiest when using their abilities to the full. If a young man or woman can project spleen, ejaculate malice and fling sly barbs of acrimony, wit and gall; if they have the power to envenom the most charitable company, or to poison the atmosphere of a death-bed – then they could not do better for themselves than to join our ranks, take our money and accept *Pox vobiscum* as their motto.

GLADYS. What about college fees?

PETRIE. Scholarships are offered to those applicants possessing real talent in tactlessness, incivility, ill-breeding, blackguardism and back-biting. Full information of the training, and individual guidance, are given in these pamphlets.

*MISS OLDBOURNE distributes pamphlets from her box to the cast.*

OLDBOURNE. If you haven't made up your mind about a career, or know of anyone hesitating, why not come and have a chat with us? It is a really worthwhile job.

PETRIE. And the key word is – WORTHWHILE.

OLDBOURNE. A job for a lifetime.

PETRIE. No salary limit. You're paid as much as you are worth.  
The work is judged entirely on results, and it is impossible to  
hide failure.

OLDBOURNE. Dr Petrie has been in practice for years. He can  
make a seasoned critic swoon with shame; has, on occasions,  
insulted the highest in the land. Politicians go in fear of him.

PETRIE. Actresses tremble.

OLDBOURNE. – the clergy mention his name in their prayers.

PETRIE. Boxers blush.

OLDBOURNE. – hostesses lose their heads when he is mentioned.

PETRIE. Poets scream.

OLDBOURNE. – men of the world join the Foreign Legion to  
forget.

PETRIE. Miss Oldbourne has bitched her way from Bishop's  
Waltham to Biskra, clawed and played the cat up and down  
the blue Nile, around the Hellespont, across the Kalahari, and  
under the Pacific – fouled Arabia and made her name a  
byword among the mujiks. In the clubs and chambers of the  
Great World they speak her name in whispers. The Kremlin  
and the Vatican agree that Grace Oldbourne is the greatest  
living exponent of giving offence where offence is due.

BOTH. Our organisation believes in the efficacy of the insult!

*Silence.*

MADGE. It sounds a lovely job.

GLADYS. I'll pass the information on to Sandra.

WEBBER. Now, Petrie, how about a final demonstration. Just to  
oblige, eh?

PETRIE. Very well.

*He fires his pistol.*

QUEENIE. Freddy Grisewood.

MADGE. Lady Barnet.

GLADYS. Noël Coward.

SYKES. Richard Dimbleby.

WEBBER. Gaitskell.

FRED. Macmillan.

*Silence.*

PETRIE. You've set me a difficult task. These are figures hopelessly beyond the range of insult. You can't apply ordinary standards to – say Grisewood: one would take him to be a symbol, some kind of Portland Place myth of the ideal man, if his own particular brand of thick-witted drivel were not unique. – Lady Barnet, a harmless, non habit-forming narcotic. Coward, an almost perfect example of the unnatural idiot. – Dimbleby, a fat, ugly, royalist martyr. Gaitskell, a seedy, politically leprous, broken-winded, moribund ex-radical, infecting his party with galloping consumption. Or MACMILLAN! – a professional zombie leading us into the valley of the shadow.

*Silence.* MISS OLDBOURNE *stares at him.*

OLDBOURNE (*incredulous*). Harry! you're a genius. You've insulted the insult-proof.

*Wild cheers, both on and offstage. PETRIE is lifted shoulder high and carried out. Silence. Blackout. Light up on FRED.*

FRED. Joe Muggins has to clear up, as usual.

*He removes the soapbox, brings on and sets up a pair of French windows. They are not connected to flats and no attempt must be made to conceal the brace.*

*Silence. Enter the OLD MAN.*

How's life treating you, Dad? Feeling better?

OLD MAN. I'm about the same.

FRED. About the same?

OLD MAN. About the same, yes. (*Pause.*) You've heard Queenie's talking of living her own life. At thirty-four. It's no age, is it?

FRED. Not at all.

*Silence.*

OLD MAN. The roses I planted have turned out to be duds.

FRED. Have you tried making a complaint?

OLD MAN. I think I will. (*Pause.*) We were so keen on having them. They were company in the long evenings.

FRED. It's a lot of trouble rearing them. The thing is (I may be barking up the wrong tree) – the basic fault is, that they're conventional at heart; they want a settled life, you see. And you can't give it to them.

OLD MAN. Do you think I'm doing wrong?

FRED. You ought to have made enquiries before you took them on.

OLD MAN (*angrily*). What help is it to say that? (*Pause.*) It's not just the roses, you know? It's everything in the garden; not a green shoot in sight. Queenie's refused to have anything to do with me. That hasn't helped.

FRED. You are in the wars.

OLD MAN. I don't know what to do for the best.

FRED. Why not hire. The Plant Hire Service is supposed to be good. You can get anything from a geranium to a cricket lawn.

You pay a few bob each week.

OLD MAN. I wouldn't dare. If I hired a garden and I spoiled it – it doesn't bear thinking about.

FRED. Why don't you go in for these moods they're advertising? I'm sure you'd get on better with them.

OLD MAN. I want to avoid creating an atmosphere.

FRED. – Sorrow and Anger (that's a good combination) or why not plain Hope? I don't like it myself. A bit too –

OLD MAN. – high?

FRED. Yes. You can't go wrong, they're guaranteed. If any variety fails to please, the shops are authorised to refund full purchase price. You can't be fairer than that.

OLD MAN. They don't suit every taste. Her sister was very queer after taking Zeal last week; and Mrs Pickersgill's become addicted to Optimism.

FRED. That's the way it goes. I'll say one thing, they make a nice change. We had Disappointment and Rage for Christmas. It was a treat really. Susan's on at me to try Despair – but I don't fancy it.

OLD MAN. I wouldn't take to Despair myself.

FRED. She swears by it. They have it every Monday morning regular.

OLD MAN. I'll give it a try.

FRED. The Royal Family are fond of Banality, though it has a funny effect on me. When they're up to their eyes in Banality at some banquet I'm at home with Apathy, Agony, Anguish, Gloom and Heartache.

OLD MAN. They have a better head for it than you.

FRED. Ecstasy is good.

OLD MAN. Not at my age.

FRED. Or Bliss?

OLD MAN. There's not much difference.

FRED. Try a mixture of Verve, Gusto and Fanaticism.

OLD MAN. Are you trying to do me in? At my time of life  
Patience is the only one I'd dare to trust; Patience with a dash  
of Apprehension.

*Enter QUEENIE.*

QUEENIE. What are you doing here?

FRED. I've an hour or two to spare.

QUEENIE. You're invited to tea, don't forget.

OLD MAN. Why didn't Madge tell him herself?

QUEENIE. I'm not speaking to you. If everybody had their deserts  
you'd be in prison by now – making the garden look a mess.  
It's spreading, you know that, don't you? You'll have to be put  
in some kind of an institution if you carry on like this.

OLD MAN. It's nothing to do with me.

QUEENIE. Oh yes it has. You've been up to something silly. The  
park looks like the Sahara. I don't know what the council will  
say when they find out. They'll lock you up.

OLD MAN (*going off*). I'd better see if there's anything I can do.

QUEENIE. Leave it alone. Madge wants you. It'll be teatime soon  
and who's going to pour the tea?

OLD MAN. Winifred and Mary. It's not a butler's job.

QUEENIE. Winifred and Mary don't exist, as you know quite well.  
Off you go and don't let's have any more argument. (*Exit OLD*



MAN.) You'd better go too, Fred.

*Exit FRED. Enter GLADYS.*

GLADYS. I thought they'd be here all day.

QUEENIE. Been waiting long?

GLADYS. About five minutes.

QUEENIE. Well?

GLADYS. Well, what?

QUEENIE. How did the interview go?

GLADYS. I got the job.

QUEENIE. Oh, good! I *am* glad.

GLADYS. I'm a bit nervous.

QUEENIE. Who did you see?

GLADYS. Old Sakyamuni.

QUEENIE. He's the chief eunuch.

GLADYS (*dreamily*). He has lovely ways.

QUEENIE. You'll have to be careful when we get out there; some of these eunuchs aren't all they seem. (*Pause.*) Did he give you your grading?

GLADYS. A1 plus.

QUEENIE. That's the highest. You'll be in attendance on Ramakrishna in person.

GLADYS. Aren't we all?

QUEENIE. Good God, no! Some of the concubines he inherited from his grandfather. He can't get rid of them, it wouldn't be right. On the other hand he can't use them. So he generally

gives them away to visiting royalty.

GLADYS. The old chap mentioned that the Mistress of the Robes had committed suttee – so her job's vacant.

QUEENIE. I wonder if Madge –

GLADYS. Why not ask?

QUEENIE. I will, when I get the chance. (*Pause.*) Those pale hands of yours will come in useful at last.

GLADYS. I'm glad I hung on to them.

QUEENIE. I'll take you with me to Madam Sarasvati next time I go – you'll soon get the hang of dancing with a jewel in your navel, and a yashmak should present no special problem. As you pass the upstairs loo, take a peep at the cobras; get used to the idea. We're trying to persuade the Zoo to lend us an elephant for an hour or so; you've no idea of the bother involved!

GLADYS. I'm still dazed by my good fortune.

*Exit.*

*Blackout.*

*Lights up.* PETRIE, OLDBOURNE and MADGE are entering by the windows.

PETRIE. Oh, dear! I've insulted you again; force of habit, I'm afraid.

MADGE. All work and no play, Dr Petrie.

OLDBOURNE. Do try to relax, Harry.

PETRIE. I am a bit of a nuisance.

MADGE. I've been looking up all your cases. You did cause the riot at the Guildhall luncheon?

OLDBOURNE. We've been resting on our laurels since then.

PETRIE. That's nothing to what's yet to be done – we've managed to wangle an invitation to the Opening of Parliament.

MADGE. You're surely never going to give offence to millions?

OLDBOURNE. It's our secret ambition.

MADGE. Well, I wish you the best of luck.

*The OLD MAN enters carrying a silver teapot, and the SMALL PART PLAYER wheels on a tea-trolley. The butler pours, the footman serves.*

*(In a conversational tone.)* After tea I'll get Jimmy to show you the sights – the source of all his wealth, the pedigree mice and his father's Toc-H badge, and there are one or two fine optical illusions to be seen from the end of the road – and perhaps we shall have time to drive out to St Mary's where my daughter Janice went to College.

*Enter WEBBER.*

WEBBER. There's a pretty kettle of fish outside on the porch. It's been waiting for two hours.

MADGE *(gaily)*. More presents! I'll get Ronald to bring them in.  
*(Calls.)* Ronald! would you see to that?

SPP. Yes, madam. *(Exit.)*

OLDBOURNE. What a lot of gorgeous presents you have; I was admiring them before lunch.

MADGE. I am lucky.

OLDBOURNE. Harry and I are giving you an eye-opener and a well-stretched point.

MADGE *(embarrassed)*. You shouldn't really. *(To WEBBER.)* Your sister's gift arrived by the afternoon post.

WEBBER. Really?

MADGE. A doornail (in extremis). However did she think of that?  
Did you tell her?

WEBBER. I did drop a hint.

MADGE. I hope you were tactful. Fanny has promised a lovely collection of P's and Q's; so we shan't have to buy any for ages.

OLDBOURNE. I must see them.

MADGE. Wilkins, would you bring the presents in here, please?

OLD MAN. Very good, madam. (*Exit.*)

MADGE. Did the car meet you, Jimmy?

WEBBER. It was such a lovely day I thought I'd walk.

MADGE. You pet! to walk! Isn't that original, Dr Petrie?

PETRIE. I don't know how you think of such things.

*Enter the OLD MAN wheeling on the wedding presents.*

MADGE (*getting up*). Now let me see, which shall I show you first.  
Here's a pair of glasses for seeing the better side of people –

OLDBOURNE. There'll be fights over who's to use them.

WEBBER. Who sent them, dear?

MADGE. Your mother. Actually they're for me. She's given you an Oedipus complex, and that ought to be enough. (*Lifting the presents.*) A roll of haywire, an old wife's tail, a potted itching palm, a duck's arse, and grandstand tickets for the rat race – they'll come in useful. Are we entering by the way?

WEBBER. Wait and see.

OLDBOURNE. A long felt want.

MADGE. As a matter of fact, it's a plastic want. There was no

label so I'm not sure who it came from.

PETRIE (*opening a jewel case*). A narrow squeak, and a tight fix –

MADGE (*to WEBBER*). From Len and Peggy. I've tried the fix on, and I think it's going to be far *too* tight. A book of inside-leg measurements. (*Opening it.*) Look at that one! Forty-five inches!

OLDBOURNE. He must have a fine long leg.

PETRIE. It will make a pleasant bedside book.

MADGE. And Milly has given me what for; isn't that just like her? She always was mean. (*Pausing to look at another gift.*) What a fantastic present to receive – a milk-jug and sugar basin!

WEBBER. Who sent that?

MADGE. Uncle Bob.

WEBBER. I might have known.

*Enter FRED.*

FRED. Can I come in?

MADGE. There's always room for one more. Dr Petrie, Miss Oldbourne – my former husband.

FRED, PETRIE *and* OLDBOURNE. How do you do.

FRED. Are we any of us old enough to remember the good old days?

PETRIE. They were before my time.

WEBBER. If we none of us can recall them we must talk about them.

OLDBOURNE. Don't talk to me about the old days. If only we had them back again.

FRED. Do you remember –

OLDBOURNE. Shall I ever forget?

FRED. Do you remember the picnic?

PETRIE. What a summer –

OLDBOURNE. What an idyll –

WEBBER. If only we had the old days back again.

OLDBOURNE. When Mother was alive –

MADGE. Very much alive –

FRED. Before the war –

MADGE. Before we lost our money –

PETRIE. Before Father and Mother died.

OLDBOURNE. What I always wanted to know *was* what did Bertie tell you that day on the picnic by the river?

PETRIE. Ah, that picnic by the river –

MADGE. – and poor, poor Bertie.

OLDBOURNE. Now what I always wanted to know *was* what did poor Father have to say when you –

MADGE. – by the river in the sun. We were so happy in the old days.

WEBBER. Before the war.

FRED. Before Father and Mother died –

OLDBOURNE. And we lost our money and the climate changed so unaccountably for the worst.

PETRIE. Ah, those were the days.

WEBBER. Ah.

MADGE. – now we are old –

FRED. – old –

MADGE. – and we have no money.

WEBBER. In the old days.

MADGE. Very much in the old days.

FRED. – before the –

MADGE. – and the –

WEBBER. – and –

OLDBOURNE. Do you remember the swans by the river?

PETRIE. Do you remember how Bertie fed them with a piece of cake from the hamper?

WEBBER. Do you remember how –

MADGE. – and do you remember when?

OLDBOURNE. What I always wanted to know *was* what did you say to make poor, poor Daisy cry so – that day, by the river, in the sun, so, so, long ago?

*Silence.*

MADGE (*with relief*). We managed that very nicely, I thought.

FRED. Do you remember how –

MADGE. Now, Fred, you can have too much of a good thing!

OLDBOURNE. Is there anything we've forgotten?

MADGE. Let me see, Picnics, Sunlight, the River, Father and Mother, Before the War, Losing Our Money– Oh! we've forgotten the cost of living.

PETRIE. Growing old is the cost of living.

MADGE. We might stretch a point.

WEBBER. We should have mentioned Morals: the Deterioration of.

FRED. And Modern Youth.

WEBBER. I think we ought to have a go at Modern Youth.

MADGE. What do you think, Dr Petrie?

PETRIE (*looking at his watch*). We'll just about make it I'd say.

MADGE. Who shall it be then?

FRED. I rather like Brian. We do that quite well.

MADGE. You begin, Dr Petrie. I always think the first line needs weight.

PETRIE *clears his throat*.

PETRIE. Let us play a game of cricket on the sands, with Brian.

MADGE. Brian doesn't want to play.

OLDBOURNE. How odd.

WEBBER. How very odd of Brian.

OLDBOURNE. Brian *is* odd, though. Or haven't you noticed how very odd Brian is?

PETRIE. Brian parts his hair on the opposite side to you and I.

FRED. Oh, there's something queer about Brian.

MADGE. Where did he get those shoes?

WEBBER. And he wears shirts marked 'non iron'.

FRED. Oh, there's something queer about Brian.



OLDBOURNE. Have you noticed how, when Brian comes in to tea, he gives a little cough before entering the room? Have you?

WEBBER. Extraordinary!

PETRIE. And he hates organised games –

MADGE. – does Brian.

PETRIE. And double-barrelled names –

MADGE. – does Brian.

WEBBER. It's a shame about Brian.

OLDBOURNE. He goes on marches and things of that sort which I and mother and father and aunt Ellen (who is most awfully good about simply everything) and gran and Bella's friend called Nancy or Myra or Elizabeth and that wonderful woman we met on holiday last year who ran a chicken farm or something – don't understand.

PETRIE. – and he PROTESTS.

MADGE. – does Brian.

WEBBER. It's a dreadful shame about Brian.

OLDBOURNE. Because his family are quite nice really. Well, there's his sister who's a bit of a bore but quite nice really. Underneath. I mean you can see she's quite nice really. And his mother is really nice. And so is his brother Tom who is married and has a Ford car and three really nice children. And I've never actually met his father but I believe he's quite nice. In fact they all are. Except Brian.

WEBBER. Except Brian.

OLDBOURNE. Brian wears jeans. No. I don't mean on holidays or at weekends or messing about in boats or in the country, where everyone does anyway. No he wears them for weddings and funerals and Christenings and for his sister's twenty-first –

and to visit the Frobishers.

ALL. To visit the FROBISHERS!

FRED. Oh, there's definitely something queer about Brian.

*Silence.*

MADGE. I don't think anybody could grumble at that, could they?

PETRIE. It's hardly Modern Youth, is it?

MADGE. Isn't it?

PETRIE. I'd say it was the attitude of the rebellee to the rebel – I mean, clearly Brian is a bit of a rebel, isn't he?

MADGE. Well, we've always called it Modern Youth, Dr Petrie, and I think it'd better stay that way, if you don't mind.

*Enter the OLD MAN.*

OLD MAN. Dinner is served, madam.

MADGE. Thank you, Wilkins.

*The OLD MAN exits.*

MADGE. Do you mind if I go in with Dr Petrie, Grace?

OLDBOURNE. Not at all.

MADGE. – because I want to ask him how to make a spectacle of myself; I've been meaning to try for ages.

*All exit, except for FRED. He comes to the edge of the stage.*

FRED. We're having a night out, Sykes, are you coming?

SYKES. I don't think so.

FRED. Come on, it's in a good cause. We're going to laugh at some of the new buildings. Queenie did a lot of damage in the city over the weekend.

SYKES. Oh, very well.

FRED. Don't breathe a word to Webber; he's fond of the modern scene.

*SYKES goes back to his seat. QUEENIE and GLADYS cross the stage.*

QUEENIE. He's put the whole thing in reverse, Glad, and he doesn't seem to know how.

GLADYS. You did go on at him.

QUEENIE. He has no sense of proportion: one minute the place is a desert, the next you have to cut your way through the trees in Wigmore Street.

GLADYS. Is it as bad as that?

QUEENIE. It couldn't be worse. Hampstead Heath has joined up with Regent's Park around Euston – they're using porters as beaters to find the platforms at King's Cross, and the new road improvements are ruined at Hyde Park, and they're getting up a grouse shoot in Old Compton Street.

GLADYS. Something ought to be done.

QUEENIE. The Forestry Commission have been round, but he doesn't understand how it came to happen. And the inconvenience he's causing; Harrods are in the middle of a woodland glade.

GLADYS. What with your father spreading the public parks and gardens and Fred organising outings to destroy the buildings, we'll all have to emigrate before long.

*Exit.*

*Lights up on MADGE and FRED. The light coming through the window has a greenish tinge.*

FRED. Look at it out there – like the Everglades!

MADGE. I feel so guilty. (*Pause.*) They're sending Dad to the Middle East to see what he can do for the Arabs. And Queenie's off to India after the wedding. (*Pause.*) I've half-promised to go with her.

FRED. You'd never stand the heat.

MADGE. I could take over the Mistress of the Robes' job.

FRED. It wants a lot of thinking about.

MADGE. Yes.

FRED. Have you considered the drawbacks?

MADGE. No, I'm leaving the drawbacks till we get out there and then I can consider them at my leisure.

FRED. There's the banshees.

MADGE. Oh, dear!

FRED. – and the ghouls.

MADGE. I can take care of myself. Living's impossible over here.

FRED. It is anywhere.

MADGE. It'll be a new life.

FRED. It won't be such a new life; it'll be the old dog-eared, shop-soiled life in a new country. (*Pause.*) You haven't taken the shape of the buildings into consideration, have you?

MADGE. I'll get used to them.

FRED. It's easy to say that. You haven't lived with buildings of a different shape. You're used to our shapes.

MADGE. It'll make a change.

FRED. You're not prepared for the worst, are you?

MADGE. I'm looking forward to it.

FRED. And turbans. They'll worry the life out of you.

MADGE. All I have to do is – keep calm.

FRED. How are you going to put up with sacred cows, and begging friars, and dervishes, and ruling castes; and are you prepared to bow to the Buddha's tooth? I daresay you would be. (*Pause.*) They'll never stand for you washing so much.

MADGE. Queenie told me not to worry.

FRED. I can't picture you in a howdah. It won't agree with you.  
And how will you cope with a teffinah or caftan?

MADGE. You don't understand. I'll be the Mistress of the Robes – it's only Gladys that's going into the harem.

FRED. It'll sap your vitality. (*Pause.*) The barbaric splendour –

MADGE. – the exotic east –

FRED. – the outposts of the Empire –

MADGE. – those nights by the Ganges.

FRED. The swaying palms and the camels and the seductive dances of the Murri-murri, oh I can see it all!

MADGE. I feel as though I'm in a different world.

FRED. – cities of intrigue.

MADGE. – veiled beauties.

FRED. There's no getting away from it, the world's a strange place.

MADGE. You can't deny it.

FRED. The Orient is beckoning –

MADGE. – it's calling me –

FRED. – the spice trade –

MADGE. The East India Company –

FRED. And how will you go on if they decide to have a durbah?  
And Calcutta, mistress of the East –

MADGE (*carried away*). Mistress of the East –

FRED. It's close in the summer.

MADGE. We'll be in the hills; above the Eternal Snows.

FRED. And the population problem. And the yaks and the burning  
ghats, and the ivory and pigeon's blood rubies –

MADGE. – and the dawn coming up like thunder –

FRED. – sepoy –

MADGE. – flying fish –

FRED. – curry –

MADGE. – Poona –

FRED. – North of Katmandu –

MADGE. – tea –

FRED. – ghurkas –

MADGE. – thuggee –

FRED. – land of mystery –

MADGE. – soma –

FRED. – purdah –

BOTH. – MOTHER INDIA!

*Silence.*

MADGE. How did we come to lose it?

FRED. That Lord Beaverbrook had a hand in it; he's too fond of throwing away the Empire. Too cavalier by half.

MADGE. He wants us to give Gibraltar to the Spaniards.

FRED. – and Malta to the Italians.

MADGE. – and Hong Kong to the Chinese.

FRED. – and the six counties to the Irish. (*Pause.*) I read between the lines in that paper of his – I know who lost us India.

MADGE. We should have been firm.

FRED. Showed no nonsense.

MADGE. Shot the lot of them.

FRED. I knew you were reactionary at heart, dear.

*Silence. Enter PETRIE, OLDBOURNE, SYKES, and QUEENIE.*

QUEENIE. It's taken us the best part of half-an-hour getting through the primulas.

MADGE. I only planted them last week.

PETRIE. Are we all prepared?

QUEENIE. We'd better go the front way.

MADGE. I can't face the ivy – it's getting beyond a joke. We'll go through the French windows and risk it.

QUEENIE. I thought he was going to get a flame-thrower?

MADGE. It's still on order.

*Exit.*

*The stage is in darkness. Sounds of laughter. The crash of falling masonry and breaking glass.*

*Lights up. All re-enter.*

QUEENIE (*breathless*). I'm worn out.

MADGE. I bet you are. You should have left the Festival Hall alone.

QUEENIE. I couldn't resist all the glass. Oh, dear! I shall have to sit down.

MADGE. Bitten off more than you can chew, haven't you?

QUEENIE. Just let me get my breath back.

FRED. Are you game for the Daily Mirror building, Dr Petrie?

PETRIE. Certainly.

FRED. And you, Grace?

OLDBOURNE. It'll have to be moral support, I'm afraid.

FRED. We'd better call it a day after this. What do you think, Sykes?

SYKES. Yes. We've done enough damage for one night.

QUEENIE. Wait for me. I can't start yet.

PETRIE. Couldn't we have the reactions while we recover our breath? I'm sure we're all interested to know what the authorities have to say.

FRED. We can't have reactions before the event.

QUEENIE. Reactions first, events afterwards.

MADGE. It isn't logic.

PETRIE. Who cares about logic; I don't.

MADGE. Oh, very well.

*Enter the SMALL PART PLAYER.*



SPP. Official reaction to the disturbing news of yesterday's protest-laughter is one of deep shock. The Prime Minister said 'We must take strong measures in order to combat the coming crisis.'

PETRIE. And what are these 'strong measures'?

SPP. The Government are seriously contemplating the setting up of a committee to investigate the cause and progress of laughter. A satisfactory solution to the problem, it is sincerely hoped, is on the way.

PETRIE. And meanwhile what do the Government propose to do?

SPP. It is not considered a serious enough problem to warrant any direct interference. The Prime Minister is flying to Washington to consult with the President.

PETRIE. Good.

SPP. The Queen is flying to Rome to visit the Pope.

PETRIE. Excellent.

SPP. The Pope has called upon Catholics everywhere to pray for the triumph of Christian thinking.

PETRIE. Splendid.

SPP. The Foreign Secretary is visiting Spain and Portugal; it is hoped this will bring about a closer understanding between the democracies.

PETRIE. Admirable.

SPP. The Leader of the Opposition has expressed alarm.

PETRIE. And what are the Opposition doing about the situation?

SPP. Why nothing, what would you have them do? The Leader of the Opposition has expressed his alarm; that is enough. He is in complete agreement with the Prime Minister: the matter is

not serious, it must never be allowed to assume the proportions of a major crisis.

PETRIE. But with no buildings, and the forests growing larger each day, it is a major crisis.

SPP. Official sources state that if we keep perfectly calm, and perfectly still, it will go away.

PETRIE. Thank you.

*Exit the SMALL PART PLAYER.*

OLDBOURNE. Are we all ready?

MADGE. What's the order?

FRED. Dr Petrie first. Queenie – are you ready?

QUEENIE. Yes.

FRED. Dr Petrie will aim at the foundations, Sykes a little higher? Queenie and Madge are concentrating on the windows as usual, and Grace – is it okay if we leave the girders to you?

OLDBOURNE. Quite all right, quite all right.

FRED. Good. Then, off we go.

*He conducts the laughter varying from bass to treble. The building is imagined out front. With each laugh or series of laughs the sound of falling masonry and cracking glass increases.*

PETRIE. What a hideous shape. (*Laughs.*)

MADGE. I don't like all that red. (*Laughs.*)

OLDBOURNE. Acres of glass and concrete – how horrible. (*Laughs.*)

SYKES. Fancy those readers subscribing to erect such an eyesore. (*Laughs.*)

QUEENIE. I wouldn't work there. (*Laughs.*)

MADGE. It gives me the horrors. (*Laughs.*)

*The laughter grows more and more hysterical while FRED conducts furiously, bringing up each solo, duet, trio or quartette with considerable skill.*

PETRIE. – glass.

OLDBOURNE. – concrete.

MADGE. – red paint.

PETRIE. – glorious idiocy.

OLDBOURNE. – visible for mile upon mile.

SYKES. – awful.

QUEENIE. – rubbishy modern filth; better a bomb site than  
THAT!

SYKES. – it hurts my eyes.

QUEENIE. – ugh!

SYKES. – of no architectural interest.

PETRIE. – none whatever.

SYKES. – worthless.

PETRIE. – sterile, dirty slop, recrement, feculence, sewer; glass-rookery, a glass ant-hill, a glass fester, frothing, rotting, concrete verbosity, a monument to a desert, to a vacuum, to a wilderness, a glass and concrete pustule!

SYKES. I execrate.

MADGE. – beshrew –

OLDBOURNE. – denounce –

PETRIE. – curse uphill and down dale the architectural wonders  
of the age!

*Enter WEBBER.*

WEBBER. Stop it! Stop this puerile display at once!

MADGE. Oh, hallo, Jimmy. I didn't know you were coming.

WEBBER. So you are responsible?

MADGE. I said I'd help Fred. He organised the outing.

PETRIE. And very successful it's been. Most of the contemporary scene – Gone!

OLDBOURNE. – wrecked.

FRED. – in ruins.

QUEENIE. – razed to the ground.

SYKES. – mounds of rubble.

MADGE (*throwing her arms around WEBBER's neck*). Congratulate us! We've done such a lot of wanton destruction.

WEBBER. It is a very dangerous ability you have discovered in yourselves. It should be used for the good of the community, not employed for pleasure. Do you want to ruin society and civilisation with your laughter?

MADGE. Yes, oh yes!

WEBBER. I shall have to think this over very seriously. I'll see you in the morning. My attitude towards you, and the prospect of a happy life together has changed materially.

*Exit.*

FRED. Now, just once more should do it. And then we'll call it a day.

*Laughter and more crashes as darkness falls.*

### **ACT THREE**

*FRED enters and brings on the chairs and standard lamp. QUEENIE sits watching.*

*House lights fade. Enter MADGE.*

MADGE. Where's Dad?

QUEENIE. Do you want him?

MADGE. No.

QUEENIE. He's packing.

MADGE. Packing?

QUEENIE. They're fetching him after the ceremony.

MADGE. He has to make a show of himself.

QUEENIE. He can't go by the road – oh! you don't know?

MADGE. Know?

QUEENIE. Look! *(Points out of the windows.)*

MADGE. Who did that?

QUEENIE. It's those runner beans – I said you shouldn't have planted them with him as he is.

MADGE. How are we ever going to get to church?

QUEENIE. I asked the vicar to come here. Grace has gone to fetch him. I told her to notch each beanstalk as she passed.

MADGE (*sitting down*). I'm so depressed.

QUEENIE. It is depressing.

MADGE. We shan't be able to stay here. Life isn't worth living if you have to go on safari for groceries.

QUEENIE. Things are never as bad as they seem. Look on the bright side. (*Pause.*) I hope Grace won't insult the vicar before she gets him into the forest.

MADGE. Does it matter.

QUEENIE. He'll take offence and get away.

MADGE. It all seems so difficult! (*Bursts into tears.*)

FRED. See what you've done?

QUEENIE. You're no help. Standing there without opening your mouth.

FRED. I had nothing to say.

SYKES *enters*.

SYKES. Hallo.

FRED. Hallo.

SYKES. I'm drunk.

FRED. That's no news; Queen Anne's dead.

SYKES. I got rid of my old values last night.

MADGE. That's a silly thing to do.

QUEENIE. You'll regret it.

MADGE. You ought to have kept some of them.

SYKES. None. Not a single one. How can I own permanent values?

MADGE. Values do deteriorate fast.

QUEENIE. Old-fashioned values are no use.

SYKES. And attitudes are the same.

MADGE. Wally and Joan had a lovely wartime attitude – what use is it now?

QUEENIE. None.

FRED. Look at Wally's father, his attitude hasn't changed since nineteen thirty-nine.

MADGE. He looks such a fool on Sundays.

FRED. He's a stubborn man.

MADGE. Wilful.

QUEENIE. Nothing makes a man so ridiculous as an old-fashioned attitude.

FRED (*prompting* SYKES). Go on. – the respectable members of society –

MADGE (*settling back in her chair*). This is the very latest in attitudes, but I don't think it's going to catch on.

QUEENIE. You do it so well.

MADGE. – the respectable members of society are –

SYKES. Perverts.

MADGE. Perverts! What a lyrical concept!

QUEENIE. Go on, go on! Why do you keep interrupting him in the middle of what he is saying.

SYKES. The most respectable are the most pervery.

FRED. Take Webber.

MADGE. Or Mrs Dale –

SYKES. – she sounds the biggest old prude unhung, but I'll bet she thinks of sex twenty-four hours a day. All the time she's talking to her mother or to Isabel, I'll bet she's nearly going out of her mind thinking of sex.

MADGE. Definitely.

QUEENIE. She'd never admit it.

MADGE. She's a modest woman.

QUEENIE. I'd be surprised if her attitudes weren't up-to-date in the right places.

FRED. It must get her down.

QUEENIE. The tantalising life she leads.

MADGE. She has lovely ways with her.

QUEENIE. Never a word or a gesture out of place.

FRED. She's a phenomenon of the age.

MADGE. Definitely.

QUEENIE. And she'd be the first to admit it.

SYKES. I must keep on, on and on, every syllable is a new attitude forming.

QUEENIE. I think you might have warned us.

SYKES. Warned you?

QUEENIE. Coming here without an attitude and then expecting us to sit by while you make yourself another.

MADGE. You're too sensitive, Queenie.



QUEENIE. I'm going. I can't be bothered watching.

MADGE. No. Wait.

SYKES....what's the difference between living off the earnings of one woman, or off hundreds of women in a factory. There are just pimps and super-pimps.

*Silence.*

MADGE. I don't like that attitude. (*Pause.*) It's in advance of avant-garde. (*Pause.*) Don't you think so!

FRED. It's a bit rum.

QUEENIE. I suppose he'd better go through with it, though where it's going to lead is anybody's guess. Go on. You can't leave it unfinished. Half an attitude is worse than none.

SYKES. That's all, I'm afraid. (*Pause.*) I'll go now, don't mind me any more.

QUEENIE. Well –

MADGE. – are you sure –

FRED. – are you sure you'll be safe?

SYKES. Quite sure.

MADGE. You must get a better attitude than that.

SYKES. I'll be okay. (*Pause.*) Goodbye, then. I'll see you before you go.

MADGE. Cheerio.

*Exit SYKES.*

FRED. He's a funny chap.

MADGE. Everyone's entitled to their opinions.

QUEENIE (*pause*). Jimmy sent you a note.

MADGE. When?

QUEENIE. Earlier on.

MADGE. Where is it?

QUEENIE. I don't know.

*The OLD MAN enters. He has on a pair of dark glasses and a white suit and solar topee.*

MADGE. Wilkins, isn't there a note for me?

OLD MAN. I believe it was put on the hall table, madam.

MADGE. I'd like to see it.

OLD MAN. Very well, madam.

*Exit.*

MADGE. What's he got up in that outfit for? Enough to frighten the crows.

QUEENIE. He's leaving for Damascus after the wedding.

MADGE. A fine thing when he has to make a laughing stock of himself at his age.

*Enter the OLD MAN with a note on a tray.*

Thank you, Wilkins.

OLD MAN. The guests have arrived, madam. Quite a number are in the garden. The lengthening shadows are keeping them amused. All our best wishes, madam.

MADGE. Thank you, Wilkins.

*Exit the OLD MAN. MISS OLDBOURNE rushes through the windows.*

OLDBOURNE. Is he here?

MADGE. Who?

OLDBOURNE. The vicar.

MADGE. Should he be?

OLDBOURNE. I've lost him! Oh, dear, can you ever forgive me?

MADGE. You've lost him?

OLDBOURNE. I was very careful. I notched each beanstalk. I told him to keep close to me. When we got him into the forest, I relaxed a little and tried a mild insult or two. His reactions were unpredictable! He ran away. I thought he'd be here.

MADGE. We'd better send out search parties.

OLDBOURNE. Would you come and help, Queenie?

QUEENIE. If you want.

OLDBOURNE. You'd better stay and see to your guests. Oh, dear! What a thing to happen.

QUEENIE. If he's lost among the polyanthus we're wasting our time.

*Exit OLDBOURNE and QUEENIE.*

MADGE. I wouldn't have such a thing happen to a clergyman, it isn't right.

FRED. A prayer or two works wonders.

MADGE. Now, Fred! Don't blaspheme. I'm not what you'd call religious, but I do like to show respect. I will say one thing for the vicar, he did know when to kneel and when to stand. It's not easy.

FRED. It isn't.

MADGE. I went with Janice to St Christopher's last week, and we got everything wrong. She didn't know when to kneel and

when to sit.

FRED. And you feel so *public*, sitting there alone.

MADGE. You do. Mind you, the vicar was very nice. He invited us backstage to his dressing-room afterwards, said he was sorry there wasn't more of an audience.

FRED. It must be disheartening.

MADGE. 'Well, vicar,' I said, 'it's no good blaming the critics if you're getting empty houses.'

FRED. Even allowing for the popularity of farce it's been a long run.

MADGE. Exactly. After two thousand years they must have recovered production costs.

FRED. I'd say so.

MADGE. The vicar is all for a good press agent, a better business manager, and a new producer. But I said, 'Vicar, you'll never have any luck unless you change your star.'

FRED. He's past it.

MADGE. I've never been keen on him.

FRED. He's over-publicised.

MADGE. So the vicar admitted that in a last resort the management were prepared to get rid of one or two members of the cast.

FRED. It would be a pity if such an old-established firm went out of business.

MADGE. A great pity.

FRED. They never closed, you know? They have been responsible for some of the world's finest spectacles.

MADGE. At prices well within our means.

FRED. The Dark Ages – they started them. Ignorance, Superstition, Barbarism – what a show! Intolerance, Bigotry – I could go on for hours.

MADGE. St Paul! what a comedian.

FRED. And then, there was the burning of the books and works of art, anti-semitism, censorship, and a leader we could all look up to. You'd be surprised how many modern things are copyright.

MADGE. Did you ever see anything to beat the Acts of the Apostles? It was a real hoot.

FRED. The Inquisition ran it close. All those cardinals and Pope Paul III (he was one of those real old-time red-nosed comics, with a special line in off-colour jokes and heresy).

MADGE. What about the Lambeth Palace mob?

FRED. You'll never get a funnier show.

MADGE. This book of theirs is a best-seller, and from the bits I've seen it deserves to be.

FRED. I couldn't help smiling at some of the turns of phrase.

MADGE. Mind you, I don't think the Church ought to take the micky out of the Bible; it isn't right.

*The sound of elephants trumpeting.*

Listen! (*Bugles and the elephants.*) The elephants. Can you hear them?

FRED. They're early.

MADGE. She ordered them for two o'clock.

FRED. What are you going to do if they don't find the vicar?

MADGE. I don't know.

FRED. Let's get up and go.

MADGE. Go? Where? And Jimmy? He'd be so upset if he came and found we'd gone without him.

FRED. You're not going to marry him?

MADGE. Did you think I would?

FRED. Not when I saw that note. He's broken it off, hasn't he?

MADGE. Yes.

FRED. So we're both jilted.

MADGE. Has Susan –

FRED. She told me last night. (*Pause. Sound of elephants.*) Hark at them. I've always wanted elephants. I never dared to do anything about it.

MADGE. It's a dangerous obsession.

FRED. I can't break myself of it.

MADGE. Why don't you come with us?

FRED. With you?

MADGE. To India.

FRED. What are you thinking of?

MADGE. You'll be sorry.

FRED. I expect I will.

MADGE. You'll lead a life of regret.

FRED. What a prospect!

MADGE. You'd be so happy looking after the beasts.

FRED. Tigers.

MADGE. Rhinos.

FRED. Crocodiles.

MADGE. And as many snakes as you could count.

FRED. And birds too, I suppose.

MADGE. Peacocks, macaws, widgeons, eagles.

FRED. It's too good to be true.

MADGE. Don't stand there thinking about it.

FRED. I wouldn't have the right boots.

MADGE. No.

FRED. I'd need a different kind of hat.

MADGE. A big, wide, hat.

FRED. A big, flat, hat.

MADGE. – with a brim; so smart.

FRED. I'm afraid I might prove inadequate.

MADGE. Not with a smart hat and a pair of boots – no one could prove inadequate.

FRED. I'd need a different personality.

MADGE. It's not good for you, all this indecision. It's silly to say it keeps you from making mistakes, it doesn't. And even if it did that would be no excuse.

FRED (*pause*). I've been hearing things lately.

MADGE. What kind of things?

FRED. Bells ringing.

MADGE. And what's wrong with that?

FRED. Voices talking.

MADGE. If you don't like them, why do you listen?

FRED. They fascinate me.

MADGE. I think it needs looking into. You ought to see old Johnson.

FRED. He's dead.

MADGE. When did it happen?

FRED. I don't think he was ever alive.

MADGE. It was that surgery of his.

*Sounds of argument offstage. Exclamations of dismay. Faint applause.*

FRED. Petrie must have started early.

MADGE. Without the vicar.

*Enter the SMALL PART PLAYER as a guest. He walks across the stage.*

FRED. Who was that?

MADGE. Some relation of Jimmy's.

FRED. I hope he finds his way through the garden.

MADGE. Yes. (*Pause.*) What do these voices say?

FRED. It's a graveyard.

MADGE. Is that all?

FRED. It's a graveyard, a graveyard.

MADGE. You shouldn't listen. No good will come of it.



FRED. How old are we now?

MADGE. I've lost count. Forty – forty-five.

FRED. We'll die in the end. (*Pause.*) Years we keep hammering away at it. (*Pause.*) In the end we manage it. (*Pause. Sigh.*) We'll manage it in the end. It won't be so bad.

MADGE. It's a sad life.

FRED. It's lonely.

MADGE. Yes.

FRED. All those years.

MADGE. All the foreign parts unvisited.

FRED. Lonely. (*Pause.*) All the people that have ever lived... their lives were lonely, they were lonely, miserable, or happy, and now it's over. (*Pause.*) How long have we been re-married?

MADGE. We're not married!

FRED. There was a time-lapse.

MADGE. I must have missed it.

*The lights dim and the stage is plunged into darkness.*

No! it's come. There is a time-lapse. You were premature. I thought I'd missed it.

MADGE *exits*.

*Lights up. FRED is lying on the ground. MADGE re-enters. Silence. Sound of the elephants.*

Listen! You'd better go and feed them. It's getting to be a problem.

FRED. The polyanthus are higher –

MADGE. – the marigolds are spreading –

FRED. – the forest has crept up to the house –

MADGE. – the convolvulus climbs in at the window –

FRED. – we lost the dog last week –

MADGE. – strangled by the honeysuckle.

*Silence.*

FRED. It's six months since the elephants arrived.

MADGE. Queenie's getting impatient. (*Pause.*) What were you doing before I came in?

FRED. I was trying to die.

MADGE. Oh. (*Pause.*) That shouldn't be difficult.

FRED. I was trying to do it without fuss. (*Pause.*) You don't understand, do you? (*Pause.*) I was trying to die without a lot of fuss. I didn't know how.

MADGE. You need a better brain.

FRED. I've never been educated to it.

MADGE. If you'd received an education, I daresay you could have done it.

FRED. I can't do anything.

MADGE. You're a failure.

FRED. What can I do?

MADGE. You can dream.

FRED. It's the only thing, isn't it. (*Pause.*) I'd better go to India with you.

MADGE. You could die.

FRED. I can't. I can't do it.

MADGE. You were doing it a minute ago, before I came in.

FRED. Only in a half-hearted way. I'd just been outside, in the forest; I saw the sun coming down through the leaves; I felt it, warm, silky, upon my neck. I wish I'd never been born, but I don't want to die. (*Pause.*) I can't hate it enough; I can't hate living enough. If I had sufficient hate I could die.

*Silence.*

*Enter the OLD MAN.*

OLD MAN. We're waiting to begin. They've found another vicar.

FRED. It's too late. We're going to India to forget our troubles.

OLD MAN. I'm not. Catch me out there with the bleeding sahibs and memsahibs.

MADGE. I'll be getting along.

FRED. Yes.

MADGE. I have to dress for the part.

FRED. All right, dear.

MADGE *exits.*

OLD MAN. So it's over?

FRED. Help me to get these things cleared away. We're packing up.

*They remove everything onstage.*

OLD MAN. What are we going to do?

FRED. We're giving up. I can't die. I'm a failure. I think I'm a failure. So I'm going on a journey. I know where this journey leads – it's a long journey. Idle dreams. Dreams.

OLD MAN. You needn't tell me. I've been half asleep all my life.

(*Elephant noises.*) Listen, just listen. (*Pause.*) Elephants, tethered to the trees in the forest. We'd have to leave anyway – everybody's leaving – the whole country covered in trees. (*Sound of a helicopter.*) There they are, coming to fetch me!

FRED. Flying you out there, aren't they?

OLD MAN. Yes. I can't remember how I did it. I'm worried in case I reverse it again.

FRED. They know what they're doing.

OLD MAN. If I turned the whole of the Middle East into a desert without oases –

FRED. Have a bit of tact.

OLD MAN. It was touch and go whether I accepted.

FRED. Eunice Foster is in business in Damascus.

OLD MAN. I'll have to look her up. She was a nice woman. I never heard anyone say a word against her. Not a word. except the time she bit her old man.

FRED. Bit her old man?

OLD MAN. Bit him one Sunday dinner time.

*FRED has removed the furniture from the stage and dismantled the French windows. He drags on a theatrical hamper and takes out an Indian robe, turban and slippers. He dresses behind the hamper.*

That's a lovely bit of silk. Is it your going-away dress?

FRED. Yes.

OLD MAN. It must have cost a bob or two.

FRED. Her old man paid for it.

OLD MAN. I shall have to get the Sheik to let me have something similar. After all I'll be doing important work.

FRED. No doubt about it.

*Silence.*

OLD MAN. Why do you suppose she would bite her old man?

FRED. She was unhappy, I suppose. He always did the best for them. All I can think is that as he got older *she* got worse. Maybe because she was so conscious of him growing old.

OLD MAN. So – she can bite him?

FRED. Well, I don't think –

OLD MAN. No. Mind you – between ourselves – strictly for the record – don't breathe a word –

FRED. You know me.

OLD MAN. Not a word to a living soul – there *is* cannibalism in the family. Her uncle (the one with the limp) disappeared sudden. They said he'd gone abroad.

FRED. Go on!

OLD MAN. I'm not kidding. There you are. That's life. Life is what you make it.

FRED. You've got to take the rough with the smooth.

OLD MAN. You never said a truer word.

FRED (*pause*). Does this turban suit me?

OLD MAN. It might have been made for you. (*Pause.*) It came as a big shock when old Webber jilted Madge.

FRED. It's all for the best.

OLD MAN. She doesn't bear him a grudge, though. She's used her influence to get him a job in charge of the eunuchs.

FRED. Good of her really.

OLD MAN. She's got a lovely nature.

FRED (*pushing the hamper into the wings*). You'd better mind out of the way, Dad. The elephants will be here any minute.

*Sound of elephants trumpeting and a band playing martial music. Enter QUEENIE as Maharanee, GLADYS as concubine, MADGE as Mistress of the Robes, and WEBBER as Commander-in-Chief of the Eunuchs. SYKES, OLDBOURNE, PETRIE and the SMALL PART PLAYER following. Trumpets. Music. A ship's siren.*

QUEENIE. Here we are – about to embark on a new life, a new beginning. On this foundation a brave future will be built.

MADGE. This is a wonderful dream-fantasy.

QUEENIE. I knew you'd enjoy yourself.

MADGE. Dr Petrie, will you carry on from here? I think we all trust you.

PETRIE. (*standing on his soapbox, which the SMALL PART PLAYER brings forward*). Those who are content to be carefree derive the greatest enjoyment from a dream. Unfortunately there are some who are wrapped up in the details of reality, having no time, no joy, of dreaming. (*Pause. Clears his throat.*) We are going to India –

ALL. To India!

PETRIE. We have our valid passports.

MADGE. – our return transportation tickets, and funds.

QUEENIE. We have our visas.

SYKES. India. We are escaping from the jungle, the undergrowth, the rankness and decay –

WEBBER. – the shrubs –

MADGE. – outsize flowers and monstrous ferns.

OLDBOURNE. We have enquired at our banks for the rate of exchange. The rupee is rising.

MADGE. Rising.

PETRIE. Constantly rising. The elephants are ready. The trumpeters. A new life awaits us in a far country. Accommodation is available to us in the beautiful Palace of the Emperors –

MADGE. – at Sutpura –

QUEENIE. Of which I am Maharanee. (*Pause.*) I love that part. I'm glad we had India.

MADGE. Not Zulus.

FRED. I wanted Zulus.

MADGE. Just because you fancy yourself in feathers is no excuse for becoming a Zulu.

WEBBER. I wanted Mandarins; Sykes wanted White Russia.

MADGE. It's too late now; we had to budget.

PETRIE. We had to budget. Zulus and Mandarins, the Imperial Guard, Satrapies and Empires –

OLDBOURNE. – are expensive.

PETRIE. Incas and Aztecs and pure-blooded Polynesians –

OLDBOURNE. – are expensive.

MADGE. India is well within our means.

*Pause.*

QUEENIE. What about the language?

WEBBER. Language.

PETRIE. The British today, by and large, are not so language conscious as they once were. We find we can get abroad with the help of a few phrases, words, including the cardinals and ordinals and days of the week.

FRED. The language difficulty mustn't be allowed to hamper a dream.

MADGE. Mustn't be allowed to hamper a fantasy.

*Pause.*

MADGE. We must remember to be polite.

FRED. It pays to be polite. We shan't call our untouchable servants 'untouchables', we shall call them –

MADGE. – helps –

WEBBER. – angels –

GLADYS. – assistants –

FRED. – reliefs –

OLDBOURNE. – supports –

PETRIE. – this gives us confidence in our authority. We shall have servants.

GLADYS. – and riches –

MADGE. – and beautiful buildings –

WEBBER. – an autocratic madness and, at the same time, a liberal sanity; combining the desired and the to-be-desired; reconciling unreconcilables.

FRED. We shall be the favourites of princes; ride in howdahs and palanquins; live in purple-hued throne rooms; dine off golden platters; listen to the music of flutes; watch the dancing of exotic slaves –

PETRIE. – of either gender.



MADGE. How marvellous!

QUEENIE. Wonderful!

PETRIE. And utterly unlikely. But is that to be despised? We shall not despise the unlikely. It is because we regard the improbable, the incredible and the contrary-to-reason as being of importance that we have made these remarks, here, at the commencement of our journey.

OLDBOURNE. Our long journey –

ALL. To India!

PETRIE. Now, to the more conventional, lifting your glasses for which you have paid sixpence, studying your programme, we shall say Goodbye. We have our guide-books to the myth, our publicity brochures of the symbol, expect moments, expect promise.

OLDBOURNE. The elephants are waiting.

WEBBER. The ships are waiting.

FRED. The tides are waiting.

MADGE. Waiting to take us away. (*Ship's siren.*)

QUEENIE. To a better life.

ALL. TO INDIA!

*Lights fade onstage and rise up on the auditorium.*

*The End.*

## JOE ORTON

Joe Orton was an English playwright and author. His public career was short but prolific, lasting from 1964 until his death three years later. During this brief period he shocked, outraged, and amused audiences with his scandalous black comedies. His first play to be staged, *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, won the London Critics' 'Variety' Award as the best play of 1964. *Loot*, his second play to be staged, won the Evening Standard Drama Award for the best play of 1966. *The Ruffian on the Stair* and *The Erpingham Camp* were performed as a double bill at the Royal Court Theatre in June 1967 under the title *Crimes of Passion*. His television plays, *The Good and Faithful Servant* and *Funeral Games*, were shown in 1967 and 1968. *What the Butler Saw*, his last play, was staged in 1969, and won a 1970 'Obie' Award for the best off-Broadway foreign play in New York. Both *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and *Loot* have been filmed. Orton also wrote a screenplay for the Beatles which was never filmed, but was subsequently published as *Up Against It*. The novels, *Head to Toe*, *Between Us Girls*, *The Boy Hairdresser* and *Lord Cucumber*, and the play *Fred & Madge* were published posthumously.

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